
THE END OF
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THE EARTH
JONATHAN
FRANZEN

Jonathan Franzen
The End of the End of the Earth

Аннотация

A sharp and provocative new essay collection from the award-winning author of Freedom and The CorrectionsIn The End of the End of the Earth, which gathers essays and speeches written mostly in the past five years, Jonathan Franzen returns with renewed vigour to the themes – both human and literary – that have long preoccupied him. Whether exploring his complex relationship with his uncle, recounting his young adulthood in New York, or offering an illuminating look at the global seabird crisis, these pieces contain all the wit and disabused realism that we've come to expect from Franzen.Taken together, these essays trace the progress of a unique and mature mind wrestling with itself, with literature and with some of the most important issues of our day, made more pressing by the current political milieu. The End of the End of the Earth is remarkable, provocative and necessary.

Содержание


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Dedication

To Kathy, again,
and in memory of Martin Schneider-Jacoby
and Mindy Baha El Din

Contents

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SAY IN DARK

definitive, not authoritative; something ventured on the basis of the author's personal experience and subjectivity—we might seem to be living in an essayistic golden age. Which party you went to on Friday night, how you were treated by a flight attendant, what your take on the political outrage of the day is: the presumption of social media is that even the tiniest subjective micronarrative is worthy not only of private notation, as in a diary, but of sharing with other people. The U.S. president now operates on this presumption. Traditionally hard-news reporting, in places like *The New York Times*, has softened up to allow the I, with its voice and opinions and impressions, to take the front-page spotlight, and book reviewers feel less and less constrained to discuss books with any kind of objectivity. It didn't use to matter if Raskolnikov and Lily Bart were likable, but the question of "likability," with its implicit privileging of the reviewer's personal feelings, is now a key element of critical judgment. And literary fiction itself is looking more and more like essay. Some of the most influential novels of recent years, by Rachel Cusk and Karl Ove Knausgaard, take the method of self-conscious first-person testimony to a new level. Their more extreme admirers will tell you that imagination and invention are outmoded contrivances; that to inhabit the subjectivity of a character unlike the author is an act of appropriation, even colonialism; that the only authentic and politically defensible mode of narrative is autobiography.

Meanwhile the personal essay itself—the formal apparatus of

honest self-examination and sustained engagement with ideas, as developed by Montaigne and advanced by Emerson and Woolf and Baldwin—is in eclipse. Most large-circulation American magazines have all but ceased to publish pure essays. The form persists mainly in smaller publications that collectively have fewer readers than Margaret Atwood has Twitter followers. Should we be mourning the essay's extinction? Or should we be celebrating its conquest of the larger culture?

A personal and subjective micronarrative: The few lessons I've learned about writing essays all came from my editor at *The New Yorker*, Henry Finder. I first went to Henry, in 1994, as a would-be journalist in pressing need of money. Largely through dumb luck, I produced a publishable article about the U.S. Postal Service, and then, through native incompetence, I wrote an unpublishable piece about the Sierra Club. This was the point at which Henry suggested that I might have some aptitude as an essayist. I heard him to be saying, "since you're obviously a crap journalist," and denied that I had any such aptitude. I'd been raised with a Midwestern horror of yakking too much about myself, and I had an additional prejudice, derived from certain wrongheaded ideas about novel-writing, against the *stating* of things that could more rewardingly be *depicted*. But I still needed

money, so I kept calling Henry for book-review assignments. On one of these calls, he asked me if I had any interest in the tobacco industry—the subject of a major new history by Richard Kluger. I quickly said: "Cigarettes are the last thing in the world I want to think about." To this, Henry even more quickly replied: "*Therefore* you must write about them."

This was my first lesson from Henry, and it remains the most important one. After smoking throughout my twenties, I'd succeeded in quitting for two years in my early thirties. But when I was assigned the post-office piece, and became terrified of picking up the phone and introducing myself as a *New Yorker* journalist, I'd taken up the habit again. In the years since then, I'd managed to think of myself as a nonsmoker, or at least as a person so firmly resolved to quit again that I might as well already have been a nonsmoker, even as I continued to smoke. My state of mind was like a quantum wave function in which I could be totally a smoker but also totally not a smoker, so long as I never took measure of myself. And it was instantly clear to me that writing about cigarettes would force me to take my measure. This is what essays do.

There was also the problem of my mother, whose father had died of lung cancer, and who was militantly anti-tobacco. I'd concealed my habit from her for more than fifteen years. One reason I needed to preserve my indeterminacy as a smoker/nonsmoker was that I didn't enjoy lying to her. As soon as I could succeed in quitting again, permanently, the wave function would

collapse and I would be, one hundred percent, the nonsmoker I'd always represented myself to be—but only if I didn't first come out, in print, as a smoker.

Henry had been a twentysomething wunderkind when Tina Brown hired him at *The New Yorker*. He had a distinctive tight-chested manner of speaking, a kind of hyperarticulate mumble, like prose acutely well edited but barely legible. I was awed by his intelligence and his erudition and had quickly come to live in fear of disappointing him. His passionate emphasis in "*Therefore* you must write about them"—he was the only speaker I knew who could get away with the stressed initial "*Therefore*" and the imperative "must"—allowed me to hope that I'd registered in his consciousness in some small way.

And so I went to work on the essay, every day combusting half a dozen low-tar cigarettes in front of a box fan in my living-room window, and handed in the only thing I ever wrote for Henry that didn't need his editing. I don't remember how my mother got her hands on the essay or how she conveyed to me her deep sense of betrayal, whether by letter or in a phone call, but I do remember that she then didn't communicate with me for six weeks—by a wide margin, the longest she ever went silent on me. It was exactly as I'd feared. But when she got over it and began sending me letters again, I felt seen by her, seen for what I was, in a way I'd never felt before. It wasn't just that my "real" self had been concealed from her; it was as if there hadn't really been a self to see.

Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, makes fun of the "busy man" for whom busyness is a way of avoiding an honest self-reckoning. You might wake up in the night and realize that you're lonely in your marriage, or that you need to think about what your level of consumption is doing to the planet, but the next day you have a million little things to do, and the day after that you have another million things. As long as there's no end of little things, you never have to stop and confront the bigger questions. Writing or reading an essay isn't the only way to stop and ask yourself who you really are and what your life might mean, but it is one good way. And if you consider how laughably unbusy Kierkegaard's Copenhagen was, compared with our own age, those subjective tweets and hasty blog posts don't seem so essayistic. They seem more like a means of avoiding what a real essay might force on us. We spend our days reading, on screens, stuff we'd never bother reading in a printed book, and bitch about how busy we are.

I quit cigarettes for the second time in 1997. And then, in 2002, for the final time. And then, in 2003, for the last and final time—unless you count the smokeless nicotine that's coursing through my bloodstream as I write this. Attempting to write an honest essay doesn't alter the multiplicity of my selves; I'm still simultaneously a reptile-brained addict, a worrier about my health, an eternal teenager, a self-medicating depressive. What changes, if I take the time to stop and measure, is that my multi-selved identity acquires *substance*.

One of the mysteries of literature is that personal substance, as perceived by both the writer and the reader, is situated outside the body of either of them, on some kind of page. How can I feel realer to myself in a thing I'm writing than I do inside my body? How can I feel closer to another person when I'm reading her words than I do when I'm sitting next to her? The answer, in part, is that both writing and reading demand full attentiveness. But it surely also has to do with the kind of *ordering* that is possible only on the page.

Here I might mention two other lessons I learned from Henry Finder. One was *Every essay, even a think piece, tells a story.* The other was *There are only two ways to organize material: "Like goes with like" and "This followed that."* These precepts may seem self-evident, but any grader of high-school or college essays can tell you that they aren't. To me it was especially not evident that a think piece should follow the rules of drama. And yet: Doesn't a good argument begin by positing some difficult problem? And doesn't it then propose an escape from the problem through some bold proposition, and set up obstacles in the form of objections and counterarguments, and finally, through a series of reversals, take us to an unforeseen but satisfying conclusion?

If you accept Henry's premise that a successful prose piece

consists of material arranged in the form of a story, and if you share my own conviction that our identities consist of the stories we tell about ourselves, it makes sense that we should get a strong hit of personal substance from the labor of writing and the pleasure of reading. When I'm alone in the woods or having dinner with a friend, I'm overwhelmed by the quantity of random sensory data coming at me. The act of writing subtracts almost everything, leaving only the alphabet and punctuation marks, and progresses toward nonrandomness. Sometimes, in ordering the elements of a familiar story, you discover that it doesn't mean what you thought it did. Sometimes, especially with an argument ("This follows *from* that"), a completely new narrative is called for. The discipline of fashioning a compelling story can crystallize thoughts and feelings you only dimly knew you had in you.

If you're looking at a mass of material that doesn't seem to lend itself to storytelling, Henry would say your only other option is to sort it into categories, grouping similar elements together: *Like goes with like.* This is, at a minimum, a tidy way to write. But patterns also have a way of turning into stories. To make sense of Donald Trump's victory in an election he was widely expected to lose, it's tempting to construct a this-followed-that story: Hillary Clinton was careless with her emails, the Justice Department chose not to prosecute her, then Anthony Weiner's emails came to light, then James Comey reported to Congress that Clinton might still be in trouble, and then Trump

won the election. But it may actually be more fruitful to group like with like: Trump's victory was *like* the Brexit vote and *like* the resurgent anti-immigrant nationalism in Europe. Clinton's imperiously sloppy handling of her emails was like her poorly messaged campaign and like her decision not to campaign harder in Michigan and Pennsylvania.

I was in Ghana on Election Day, birdwatching with my brother and two friends. James Comey's report to Congress had unsettled the campaign before I left for Africa, but Nate Silver's authoritative polling website, FiveThirtyEight, was still giving Trump just a thirty percent chance of winning. Having cast an early ballot for Clinton, I'd arrived in Accra feeling only moderately anxious about the election and congratulating myself on my decision to spend the final week of the campaign not checking FiveThirtyEight ten times a day.

I was indulging a different sort of compulsion in Ghana. To my shame, I am what people in the world of birding call a lister. It's not that I don't love birds for their own sake. I go birding to experience their beauty and diversity, learn more about their behavior and the ecosystems they belong to, and take long, attentive walks in new places. But I also keep way too many lists. I count not only the bird species I've seen worldwide but the

ones I've seen in every country and every U.S. state I've birded in, also at various smaller sites, including my back yard, and in every calendar year since 2003. I can rationalize my compulsive counting as an extra little game I play within the context of my passion. But I really am compulsive. This makes me morally inferior to birders who bird exclusively for the joy of it.

It happened that by going to Ghana I'd given myself a chance to break my previous year-list record of 1,286 species. I was already over 800 for 2016, and I knew, from my online research, that trips similar to ours had produced nearly 500 species, only a handful of which are also common in America. If I could see 460 unique year species in Africa, and then use my seven-hour layover in London to pick up twenty easy European birds at a park near Heathrow, 2016 would be my best year ever.

We were seeing great stuff in Ghana, spectacular turacos and bee-eaters found only in West Africa. But the country's few remaining forests are under intense hunting and logging pressure, and our walks in them were more sweltering than productive. By the evening of Election Day, we'd already missed our only shot at several of my target species. Very early the next morning, when polls were still open on the West Coast of the States, I turned on my phone for the pleasure of confirming that Clinton was winning the election. What I found instead were stricken texts from my friends in California, with pictures of them staring at a TV and looking morose, my girlfriend curled up on a sofa in a fetal position. The *Times* headline of the moment was "Trump

Takes North Carolina, Building Momentum; *Clinton's Path to Victory Narrow*."

There was nothing to be done but go birding. On a road in the Nsuta Forest, dodging timber trucks whose momentum I associated with Trump's, and yet clinging to the idea that Clinton still had a path to victory, I saw Black Dwarf Hornbills, an African Cuckoo-Hawk, and a Melancholy Woodpecker.[1] It was a sweaty but satisfactory morning that ended, when we re-emerged into network coverage, with the news that the "short-fingered vulgarian" (*Spy* magazine's memorable epithet) was my country's new president. This was the moment when I saw what my mind had been doing with Nate Silver's figure of thirty percent for Trump's odds. Somehow I'd taken the figure to mean that the world might be, worst-case, thirty percent shittier after Election Day. What the number actually represented, of course, was a thirty percent chance of the world's being one hundred percent shittier.

As we traveled up into drier, emptier northern Ghana, we intersected with some birds I'd long dreamed of seeing: Egyptian Plovers, Carmine Bee-eaters, and a male Standard-winged Nightjar, whose outrageous wing streamers gave it the look of a nighthawk being closely pursued by two bats. But we were falling ever farther behind the year-bird pace I needed to maintain. It occurred to me, belatedly, that the trip lists I'd seen online had included species that were only heard, not seen, while I needed to see a bird to count it. Those lists had raised my

hopes the way Nate Silver had. Now every target species I missed increased the pressure to see all of the remaining targets, even the wildly unlikely ones, if I wanted to break my record. It was only a stupid year list, ultimately meaningless even to me, but I was haunted by the headline from the morning after Election Day. Instead of 275 electoral votes, I needed 460 species, and my path to victory was becoming very narrow. Finally, four days before the end of the trip, in the spillway of a dam near the Burkina Faso border, where I'd hoped to get half a dozen new grassland birds and saw zero, I had to accept the reality of loss. I was suddenly aware that I should have been at home, trying to console my girlfriend about the election, exercising the one benefit of being a depressive pessimist, which is the propensity to laugh in dark times.

How had the short-fingered vulgarian reached the White House? When Hillary Clinton started speaking in public again, she lent credence to a like-goes-with-like account of her character by advancing a this-followed-that narrative. Never mind that she'd mishandled her emails and uttered the phrase "basket of deplorables." Never mind that voters might have had legitimate grievances with the liberal elite she represented; might have failed to appreciate the rationality of free trade, open

borders, and factory automation when the overall gains in global wealth came at middle-class expense; might have resented the federal imposition of liberal urban values on conservative rural communities. According to Clinton, her loss was the fault of James Comey—maybe also of the Russians.

Admittedly, I had my own neat narrative account. When I came home from Africa to Santa Cruz, my progressive friends were still struggling to understand how Trump could have won. I remembered a public event I'd once done with the optimistic social-media specialist Clay Shirky, who'd recounted to the audience how "shocked" professional New York restaurant critics had been when Zagat, a crowdsourced reviewing service, had named Union Square Cafe the best restaurant in town. Shirky's point was that professional critics aren't as smart as they think they are; that, in fact, in the age of Big Data, critics are no longer even necessary. At the event, ignoring the fact that Union Square Cafe was *my* favorite New York restaurant (the crowd was right!), I'd sourly wondered if Shirky believed that critics were also stupid to consider Alice Munro a better writer than James Patterson. But now Trump's victory, too, had vindicated Shirky's mockery of pundits. Social media had allowed Trump to bypass the critical establishment, and just enough members of the crowd, in key swing states, had found his low comedy and his incendiary speech "better" than Clinton's nuanced arguments and her mastery of policy. *This follows from that*: without Twitter and Facebook, no Trump.

After the election, Mark Zuckerberg did briefly seem to take responsibility, sort of, for having created the platform of choice for fake news about Clinton, and to suggest that Facebook could become more active in filtering the news. (Good luck with that.) Twitter, for its part, kept its head down. As Trump's tweeting continued unabated, what could Twitter possibly say? That it was making the world a better place?

In December, my favorite Santa Cruz radio station, KPIG, began running a fake ad offering counseling services to addicts of Trump-hating tweets and Facebook posts. The following month, a week before Trump's inauguration, the PEN American Center organized events around the country to reject the assault on free speech that it claimed Trump represented. Although his administration's travel restrictions did later make it harder for writers from Muslim countries to have their voices heard in the United States, the one bad thing that could *not* be said of Trump, in January, was that he had in any way curtailed free speech. His lying, bullying tweets were free speech on steroids. PEN itself, just a few years earlier, had given a free-speech award to Twitter, for its self-publicized role in the Arab Spring. The actual result of the Arab Spring had been a retrenchment of autocracy, and Twitter had since revealed itself, in Trump's hands, to be a platform made to order for autocracy, but the ironies didn't end there. During the same week in January, progressive American bookstores and authors proposed a boycott of Simon & Schuster for the crime of intending to publish one

book by the dismal right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos. The angriest of the bookstores talked of refusing to stock *all* titles from S&S, including, presumably, the books of Andrew Solomon, the president of PEN. The talk didn't end until S&S voided its contract with Yiannopoulos.

Trump and his alt-right supporters take pleasure in pushing the buttons of the politically correct, but it only works because the buttons are there to be pushed—students and activists claiming the right to not hear things that upset them, and to shout down ideas that offend them. Intolerance particularly flourishes online, where measured speech is punished by not getting clicked on, invisible Facebook and Google algorithms steer you toward content you agree with, and nonconforming voices stay silent for fear of being flamed or trolled or unfriended. The result is a silo in which, whatever side you're on, you feel absolutely right to hate what you hate. And here is another way in which the essay differs from superficially similar kinds of subjective speech. The essay's roots are in literature, and literature at its best—the work of Alice Munro, for example—invites you to ask whether you might be somewhat wrong, maybe even entirely wrong, and to imagine why someone else might hate you.

Three years ago, I was in a state of rage about climate change.

The Republican Party was continuing to lie about the absence of a scientific consensus on climate—Florida's Department of Environmental Protection had gone so far as to forbid its employees to write the words *climate change*, after Florida's governor, a Republican, insisted that it wasn't a "true fact"—but I wasn't much less angry at the left. I'd read a new book by Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, in which she assured the reader that, although "time is tight," we still have ten years to radically remake the global economy and prevent global temperatures from rising by more than two degrees Celsius by the end of the century. Klein's optimism was touching, but it, too, was a kind of denialism. Even before the election of Donald Trump, there was no evidence to suggest that humanity is capable—politically, psychologically, ethically, economically—of slashing carbon emissions quickly and deeply enough to change everything. Even the European Union, which had taken the early lead on climate, and was fond of lecturing other regions on their irresponsibility, needed only a recession in 2009 to shift its focus to economic growth. Barring a worldwide revolt against free-market capitalism in the next ten years—the scenario that Klein contended could still save us—the most *likely* rise in temperature this century is on the order of six degrees. We'll be lucky to avoid a two-degree rise before the year 2030.

In a polity ever more starkly divided, the truth about global warming was even less convenient to the left than to the right. The right's denials were odious lies, but at least they were

consistent with a certain cold-eyed political realism. The left, having excoriated the right for its intellectual dishonesty and turned climate denialism into a political rallying cry, was now in an impossible position. It had to keep insisting on the truth of climate science while persisting in the fiction that collective world action could stave off the worst of it: that universal acceptance of the facts, which really might have changed everything in 1995, could still change everything. Otherwise, what difference did it make if the Republicans quibbled with the science?

Because my sympathies were with the left—reducing carbon emissions is vastly better than doing nothing; every half degree helps—I also held it to a higher standard. Denying the dark reality, pretending that the Paris Accord could avert catastrophe, was understandable as a tactic to keep people motivated to reduce emissions; to keep hope alive. As a strategy, though, it did more harm than good. It ceded the ethical high ground, insulted the intelligence of unpersuaded voters ("Really? We still have ten years?"), and precluded frank discussion of how the global community should prepare for drastic changes, and how nations like Bangladesh should be compensated for what nations like the United States have done to them.

Dishonesty also skewed priorities. In the past twenty years, the environmental movement had become captive to a single issue. Partly out of genuine alarm, partly also because foregrounding human problems was politically less risky—less elitist—than

talking about nature, the big environmental NGOs had all invested their political capital in fighting climate change, a problem with a human face. The NGO that particularly enraged me, as a bird lover, was the National Audubon Society, once an uncompromising defender of birds, now a lethargic institution with a very large PR department. In September 2014, with much fanfare, that PR department had announced to the world that climate change was the number-one threat to the birds of North America. The announcement was both narrowly dishonest, because its wording didn't square with the conclusions of Audubon's own scientists, and broadly dishonest, because not one single bird death could be directly attributed to human carbon emissions. In 2014, the most serious threats to American birds were habitat loss and outdoor cats. By invoking the buzzword of climate change, Audubon got a lot of attention in the liberal media; another point had been scored against the science-denying right. But it was not at all clear how this helped birds. The only practical effect of Audubon's announcement, it seemed to me, was to discourage people from addressing the real threats to nature in the present.

I was so angry that I decided that I'd better write an essay. I began with a jeremiad against the National Audubon Society,

broadened it into a scornful denunciation of the environmental movement generally, and then started waking up in the night in a panic of remorse and doubt. For the writer, an essay is a mirror, and I didn't like what I was seeing in this one. Why was I excoriating fellow liberals when the denialists were so much worse? The prospect of climate change was every bit as sickening to me as to the groups I was attacking. With every additional degree of global warming, further hundreds of millions of people around the world would suffer. Wasn't it worth an all-out effort to achieve a reduction of even half of one degree? Wasn't it obscene to be talking about birds when children in Bangladesh were threatened? Yes, the premise of my essay was that we have an ethical responsibility to other species as well as to our own. But what if that premise was false? And, even if it was true, did I really care personally about biodiversity? Or was I just a privileged white guy who liked to go birding? And not even a pure-hearted birder—a lister!

After three nights of doubting my character and motives, I called Henry Finder and told him I couldn't write the piece. I'd done plenty of ranting about climate to my friends and to like-minded conservationists, but it was like a lot of the ranting that happens online, where you're protected by the impromptu nature of the writing and by the known friendliness of your audience. Trying to write a finished thing, an essay, had made me aware of the sloppiness of my thinking. It had also enormously increased the risk of shame, because the writing wasn't casual, and because

it was going out to an audience of probably hostile strangers. Following Henry's admonition ("*Therefore*"), I'd come to think of the essayist as a firefighter, whose job, while everyone else is fleeing the flames of shame, is to run straight into them. But I had a lot more to fear now than my mother's disapproval.

My essay might have stayed abandoned if I hadn't already clicked a button on Audubon's website, affirming that, yes, I wanted to join it in fighting climate change. I'd only done this to gather rhetorical ammunition to use against Audubon, but a deluge of direct-mail solicitations had followed from that click. I got at least eight of them in six weeks, all of them asking me to give money, along with a similar deluge in my email in-box. A few days after speaking to Henry, I opened one of the emails and found myself looking at a picture of *myself*—luckily a flattering image, taken in 2010 for *Vogue* magazine, which had dressed me up better than I dress myself and posed me in a field with my binoculars, like a birder. The headline of the email was something like "Join Author Jonathan Franzen in Supporting Audubon." It was true that, a few years earlier, in an interview with *Audubon* magazine, I'd politely praised the organization, or at least its magazine. But no one had asked for my permission to use my name and image for solicitation. I wasn't sure the email was even legal.

A more benign impetus to return to the essay came from Henry. As far as I know, Henry couldn't care less about birds, but he seemed to see something in my argument that our

preoccupation with future catastrophes discourages us from tackling solvable environmental problems in the here and now. In an email to me, he gently suggested that I lose the tone of prophetic scorn. "This piece will be more persuasive," he wrote in another, "if, ironically, it's more ambivalent, less polemical. You're not whaling on folks who want us to pay attention to climate change and emission reductions. But you're attentive to the costs. To what the discourse pushes to the margins." Email by email, revision by revision, Henry nudged me toward framing the essay not as a denunciation but as a question: How do we find meaning in our actions when the world seems to be coming to an end? Much of the final draft was devoted to a pair of well-conceived regional conservation projects, in Peru and Costa Rica, where the world really is being made a better place, not just for wild plants and wild animals but for the Peruvians and Costa Ricans who live there. Work on these projects is personally meaningful, and the benefits are immediate and tangible.

In writing about the two projects, I hoped that one or two of the big charitable foundations, the ones spending tens of millions of dollars on biodiesel development or on wind farms in Eritrea, might read the piece and consider investing in work that produces tangible results. What I got instead was a missile attack from the liberal silo. I'm not on social media, but my friends reported that I was being called all sorts of names, including "birdbrain" and "climate-change denier." Tweet-size snippets of my essay, retweeted out of context, made it sound as if I'd

proposed that we *abandon* the effort to reduce carbon emissions, which was the position of the Republican Party, which, by the polarizing logic of online discourse, made me a climate-change denier. In fact, I'm such a climate-science accepter that I don't even bother having hope for the ice caps. All I'd denied was that a right-minded international elite, meeting in nice hotels around the world, could stop them from melting. This was my crime against orthodoxy. Climate now has such a lock on the liberal imagination that any attempt to change the conversation —even trying to change it to the epic extinction event that human beings are already creating without the help of climate change— amounts to an offense against religion.

I did have sympathy for the climate-change professionals who denounced the essay. They'd been working for decades to raise the alarm in America, and they finally had President Obama on board with them; they had the Paris Accord. It was an inopportune time to point out that drastic global warming is already a done deal, and that it seems unlikely that humanity is going to leave any carbon in the ground, given that, even now, not one country in the world has pledged to do it. I also understood the fury of the alternative-energy industry, which is a business like any other. If you allow that renewable-energy projects are only a moderating tactic, unable to reverse the damage that past carbon emissions will continue to do for centuries, it opens the door to other questions about the business. Like, did we really need quite so many windmills? Did they have to be placed in

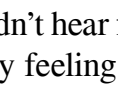
ecologically sensitive areas? And the solar farms in the Mojave Desert—wouldn't it make more sense to cover the city of Los Angeles with solar panels and spare the open space? Weren't we sort of destroying the natural world in order to save it? I believe it was an industry blogger who called me a birdbrain.

As for Audubon, the fund-raising email should have warned me about the character of its management. But I was still surprised by its response to the essay, which was to attack, ad hominem, the person whose name and image it had blithely appropriated two months earlier. My essay had, yes, given Audubon some tough love. I wanted it to cut out the nonsense, stop talking about fifty years from now, and be more aggressive in defending the birds that both it and I love. But apparently all Audubon could see was a threat to its membership numbers and its fund-raising efforts, and so it had to negate me as a person. I'm told the president of Audubon fired off four different salvos at me personally. This is what presidents do now.

And it worked. Without even reading those salvos—simply from knowing that other people were reading them—I felt ashamed. I felt the way I'd felt in eighth grade, shunned by the crowd and called names that shouldn't have hurt but did. I wished I'd listened to my panics in the night and kept my opinions to myself. In a state of some anguish, I called up Henry and dumped all my shame and regret on him. He replied, in his barely legible way, that the online response was only weather. "With public opinion," he said, "there's weather, and then there's climate.

You're trying to change the climate, and that takes time."

It didn't matter if I believed this or not. It was enough to feel that one person, Henry, didn't hate me. I consoled myself with the thought that, although climate is too vast and chaotic for any individual to alter it, the individual can still find meaning in trying to make a difference to one afflicted village, one victim of global injustice. Or to one bird, or one reader. After the online flames had died down, I started hearing privately from conservation workers who shared my frustrations but couldn't afford to express them. I didn't hear from many people, but there didn't have to be many. My feeling in each case was the same: The person I wrote the essay for is you.



But now, two and a half years later, as ice shelves crumble and the Twitter president pulls out of the Paris Accord, I'm not so sure. Now I can admit to myself that I didn't write the essay just to hearten a few conservationists and deflect some charitable dollars to better causes. I really did want to change the climate. I still do. I share, with the very people my essay criticized, the recognition that global warming is *the* issue of our time, perhaps the biggest issue in all of human history. Every one of us is now in the position of the indigenous Americans when the Europeans arrived with guns and smallpox: our world is poised to change

vastly, unpredictably, and mostly for the worse. I don't have any hope that we can stop the change from coming. My only hope is that we can accept the reality in time to prepare for it humanely, and my only faith is that facing it honestly, however painful this may be, is better than denying it.

If I were writing the essay today, I might say all this. The mirror of the essay, as it was published, reflected an angry bird-loving misfit who thinks he's smarter than the crowd. That character may be me, but it's not the whole me, and a better essay would have reflected that. In a better essay, I might still have given Audubon the rebuke it deserved, but I would have found my way to more sympathy for the other people I was angry at: for the climate activists, who for twenty years had watched their path to victory narrow sickeningly, as carbon emissions mounted and the necessary emissions-reduction targets grew ever more unrealistic, and for the alternative-energy workers who had families to feed and were trying to see beyond petroleum, and for the environmental NGOs that thought they'd finally found an issue that could wake the world up, and for the leftists who, as neoliberalism and its technologies reduced the electorate to individual consumers, saw climate change as the last strong argument for collectivism. I would especially have tried to remember all the people who need more hope in their lives than a depressive pessimist does, the people for whom the prospect of a hot, calamity-filled future is unbearably sad and frightening, and who can be forgiven for not wanting to think about it. I would

have kept revising.

to burn before the next thing, and New York beckoned. V went up to the city and signed a three-month lease on the apartment of a Columbia student, Bobby Atkins, who may have been the son of the creator of the Atkins Diet, or maybe we just enjoyed imagining that he was. His place, on the southwest corner of 110th Street and Amsterdam, had two small bedrooms and was irremediably filthy. We arrived in June with a fifth of Tanqueray, a carton of Marlboro Lights, and Marcella Hazan's Italian cookbook. Someone had left behind a spineless black plush-toy panther, manufactured in Korea, which we liberated and made ours.

We were living on a margin. Before full-scale gentrification, before mass incarceration, the city seemed starkly drawn in black and white. When a young Harlem humorist on the uptown 3 train performed the "magic" act of making every white passenger disappear at Ninety-sixth Street, I felt tried and found guilty of whiteness. Our friend Jon Justice, who that summer had Thomas Pynchon's *V* stuffed into the back pocket of his corduroys, was mugged at Grant's Tomb, where he shouldn't have been. I was aesthetically attracted to cities but morbidly afraid of being shot. In New York, Amsterdam Avenue was a sharp dividing line, and I stood on the east side of it only once, when I made the mistake of riding a C train to 110th and walking home from there. It was late afternoon and nobody paid attention to me, but I was light-headed with fear. Deepening my impression of menace were the heavy, light-blocking security gates on our windows and the

police lock in our entry hall, its steel rod anchored to the floor and angling up to a slot on the front door. I associated it with our next-door neighbor, an elderly white man with raging senile dementia. He would pound on our door or stand on the landing, wearing only pajama bottoms, and asseverate, over and over, using a vile epithet, that his wife was having relations with black men. I was afraid of him, too, and I hated him for naming a racial division we liberal kids accepted in silence.

In theory, V and I were trying to write fiction, but I was oppressed by the summer heat and by the penitentiary gloom of the Atkins place, the cockroaches, the wandering neighbor. V and I fought, wept, made up, and played with our black panther. We practiced cooking and semiotic criticism and ventured out —always going west—to the Thalia, and Hunan Balcony, and Papyrus Books, where I bought the latest issue of *Semiotext(e)* and dense volumes of theory by Derrida and Kenneth Burke. I don't remember how I had any money at all. Conceivably my parents, despite their disapproval of New York and of my cohabitation with V, had given me some hundreds of dollars. I do remember sending letters to various magazines, inquiring about paid internships, and being told that I needed to have applied six months earlier.

Luckily, my brother Tom was in New York that summer, doing a loft conversion for the hotshot young photographer Gregory Heisler. Tom, who was then based in Chicago, had come east with a Chicago friend of Heisler's who wanted to start a

renovation business and hoped to pick up some skills from my brother and split the profits. But Heisler could see that Tom had all the know-how. Before long, the friend was sent back to Chicago, leaving Tom without a laborer. This became my job.

Heisler was a portraitist, eventually best known for his double-exposed image of George H. W. Bush on the cover of *Time*. His loft was at the corner of Broadway and Houston, on the top floor of the Cable Building, then a den of sweatshops, later the home of the Angelika theater. The building was zoned for commercial use, and Tom and Heisler hadn't bothered with city permits, and so for me, at least, there was a frisson of illegality to the hidden apartment that Tom was building behind the photo studio's south wall. Heisler wanted every surface in the apartment covered with a trendy gray plastic laminate whose little raised dots made edging it with a router a nightmare. I spent long afternoons in a cloud of acetone fumes, cleaning rubber cement off the laminate, while Tom, in another room, cursed the raised dots.

My main job was to fetch things. Every morning, Tom gave me a shopping list of construction staples and exotica, and I made the rounds of supply stores on the Bowery and Canal Street. East of the Bowery were the dangerous alphabet streets and the projects, a zone of no-go on my mental map of the island. But in the rest of lower Manhattan I found the aesthetic experience I'd been looking for. SoHo's transformation was still larval, its streets quiet, its iron pillars peeling. Lower Broadway

was peopled with garment workers, and the city below Canal seemed hungover from the seventies, as if the buildings were surprised to find themselves still standing. On the Fourth of July weekend, V and Jon Justice and I got up onto the old West Side Elevated Highway (closed but not yet demolished) and went walking under the new World Trade Center towers (brutalist but not yet tragic) and didn't see another person, white or black, in any direction. Romantically deserted vistas were what I wanted in a city when I was twenty-one.

On the evening of the Fourth, when Morningside Heights began to sound like wartime Beirut, V and I went over to East End Avenue to watch the official fireworks from our friend Lisa Albert's family's apartment. I was astonished when her building's elevator opened directly into the apartment's front hall. Her family's cook asked me if I'd like a sandwich, and I said yes, please. It had never occurred to me that my background and Albert's weren't more or less the same. I hadn't imagined that an apartment like hers existed, or that a person only five years older than I was, Greg Heisler, could have a team of assistants at his disposal. He also had a willowy and dumbstrikingly beautiful wife, Pru, who came from Australia and wore airy white summer dresses that made me think of Daisy Buchanan.

The city's dividing line of wealth was not unrelated to the other dividing line, but it was less distinctly geographical and easier for me to cross. Under the spell of my elite college education, I envisioned overthrowing the capitalist political economy in the near future, through the application of literary theory, but in the meantime my education enabled me to feel at ease on the wealth side of the line. At the formal midtown restaurant where V's visiting grandmother took the two of us to lunch one day, I was given a blue blazer to wear with my black jeans, and this was all it took for me to pass.

I was too idealistic to want more money than I needed to subsist, too arrogant to envy Heisler, and so to me the rich were mainly a curiosity, interesting for the conspicuousness of both their consumption and their thrift. When V and I visited her other grandparents, at their country estate outside the city, they showed me the little paintings by Renoir and Cézanne in their living room and served us stale store-bought cookies. At Tavern on the Green, where we were taken to dinner by my brother Bob's in-laws, a pair of psychoanalysts who had an apartment not a lot smaller than Albert's, I was appalled to learn that if you wanted a vegetable with your steak you had to pay extra for it. The money seemed of no consequence to Bob's father-in-law, but we noticed that one of the mother-in-law's shoes was held together with electrical tape. Heisler, too, was given to grand gestures, like flying Tom's soon-to-be wife out from Chicago for a weekend. But he paid Tom $12,500 for the loft conversion,

approximately one-eighth of what it would have cost with a New York contractor.

It was people like Tom and me who didn't recognize the value of what they had in hand. Tom realized too late that he could easily have charged Heisler two or three times as much, and I left Manhattan, in mid-August, owing $225 to St. Luke's Hospital. To celebrate the end of the summer and also, I think, our engagement to be married, V and I had gone to dinner at a Cuban restaurant on Columbus Avenue, Victor's, which her former boyfriend, a Cuban, had frequented. I started with black bean soup and was a few spoonfuls into it when the beans seemed to come alive on my tongue, churning with a kind of malevolent aggression. I reached into my mouth and pulled out a narrow shard of glass. V flagged down our server and complained to him. The server summoned the manager, who apologized, examined the piece of glass, disappeared with it, and then came back to hustle us out of the restaurant. I was pressing a napkin to my tongue to stanch the bleeding. At the front door, I asked if it was okay for me to keep the napkin. "Yes, yes," the manager said, shutting the door behind us. V and I hailed our only cab of the summer and went directly to St. Luke's, our neighborhood hospital. Eventually a doctor told me that my cut would heal quickly and did not require stitches, but I had to wait a couple of hours to receive this information and a tetanus shot. Directly across from me, in one of the corridors where I waited, a young African-American woman was lying on a gurney with a gunshot

wound in her bared abdomen. The wound was leaking pinkish fluid but was evidently not life-threatening. I can still see it vividly, a .22-caliber-size hole, the thing I'd walked in fear of.

Fifteen years later, after being married and divorced, I built a work studio in a loft on 125th Street, following Tom's example and hanging my own drywall, wiring my own outlets. I'd gotten smarter about money, and I was able to jump on a cheap space in Harlem because I wasn't scared of the city anymore. I had a personal connection with the Harlemites in my building, and after work I could go downtown and safely walk with my friends on the alphabet streets, which were being colonized by young white people. In time, on the strength of the sales of the book I'd written in Harlem, I bought my own Upper East Side co-op and became a person who took younger friends and relatives to dinner at places they couldn't have afforded.

The city's dividing line had become more permeable, at least in one direction. White power had reasserted itself through the pressure of real-estate prices and police action. In hindsight, the era of white fear seems most remarkable for having lasted as long as it did. Of all my mistakes as a twenty-one-year-old in the city, the one I now regret the most was my failure to imagine that the black New Yorkers I was afraid of might be even more afraid

than I was.

On my last full day in Manhattan that summer, I got a check from Greg Heisler for my last four weeks of work. To cash it, I had to go to the European American Bank, a strange little hexagonal building that sat on a bite of dismal parkland taken out of SoHo's southeast flank. I don't remember how many hundred-dollar bills I was given there—maybe it was six, maybe nine—but it seemed to me a dangerous amount of cash to carry in my wallet. Before I left the bank, I discreetly slipped the bills into one of my socks. Outside, it was one of those bright August mornings when a cold front flushes the badness from the city's sky. I headed straight to the nearest subway, anxious about my wealth, hoping I could pass as poor to someone who wanted the money in my sock more than I did.

world. Things with feathers can be found in every corner of every ocean and in land habitats so bleak that they're habitats for nothing else. Gray Gulls raise their chicks in Chile's Atacama Desert, one of the driest places on Earth. Emperor Penguins incubate their eggs in Antarctica in winter. Goshawks nest in the Berlin cemetery where Marlene Dietrich is buried, sparrows in Manhattan traffic lights, swifts in sea caves, vultures on Himalayan cliffs, chaffinches in Chernobyl. The only forms of life more widely distributed than birds are microscopic.

To survive in so many different habitats, the world's ten thousand or so bird species have evolved into a spectacular diversity of forms. They range in size from the ostrich, which can reach nine feet in height and is widespread in Africa, to the aptly named Bee Hummingbird, found only in Cuba. Their bills can be massive (pelicans, toucans), tiny (Weebills), or as long as the rest of their body (Sword-billed Hummingbirds). Some birds—the Painted Bunting in Texas, Gould's Sunbird in South Asia, the Rainbow Lorikeet in Australia—are gaudier than any flower. Others come in one of the nearly infinite shades of brown that tax the vocabulary of avian taxonomists: *rufous*, *fulvous*, *ferruginous*, *bran-colored*, *foxy*.

Birds are no less diverse behaviorally. Some are highly social, others anti. African queleas and flamingos gather in flocks of millions, and parakeets build whole parakeet cities out of sticks. Dippers walk alone and underwater, on the beds of mountain streams, and a Wandering Albatross may glide on its ten-foot

wingspan five hundred miles away from any other albatrosses. New Zealand Fantails are friendly and may follow you on a trail. A caracara, if you stare at it too long, will swoop down and try to knock your head off. Roadrunners kill rattlesnakes for food by teaming up on them, one bird distracting the snake while another sneaks up behind it. Bee-eaters eat bees. Leaftossers toss leaves. The Oilbird, a unique nocturnal species of the American tropics, glides over avocado trees and snatches fruit on the fly; Snail Kites do the same thing, except with snails. Thick-billed Murres can dive underwater to a depth of 700 feet, Peregrine Falcons downward through the air at 240 miles an hour. A Wren-like Rushbird will spend its entire life beside one half-acre pond, while a Cerulean Warbler may migrate to Peru and then find its way back to the tree in New Jersey where it nested the year before.

Birds aren't furry and cuddly, but in many respects they're more similar to us than other mammals are. They build intricate homes and raise families in them. They take long winter vacations in warm places. Cockatoos are shrewd thinkers, solving puzzles that would challenge a chimpanzee, and crows like to play. (Check out the YouTube video of a crow in Russia sledding down a snowy roof on a plastic lid, flying back up with the lid in its beak, and sledding down again.) And then there are the songs with which birds, like us, fill the world. Nightingales trill in the suburbs of Europe, thrushes in downtown Quito, hwameis in Chengdu. Chickadees have a complex language for

communicating, not only to one another but to every bird in their neighborhood, how safe or unsafe they feel from predators. Some lyrebirds in eastern Australia sing a tune their ancestors may have learned from a settler's flute nearly a century ago. If you shoot too many pictures of a lyrebird, it will add the sound of your camera to its repertoire.

But birds also do the thing we all wish we could do but can't, except in dreams: they fly. Eagles effortlessly ride thermals; hummingbirds pause in midair; quail burst into flight heart-stoppingly. Taken in sum, the flight paths of birds bind the planet together like a hundred billion filaments, tree to tree and continent to continent. There was never a time when the world seemed large to them. After breeding, a European swift will stay aloft for nearly a year, flying to sub-Saharan Africa and back, eating and molting and sleeping on the wing, without landing once. Young albatrosses spend as many as ten years roving the open ocean before they first return to land to breed. A Bar-tailed Godwit has been tracked flying nonstop from Alaska to New Zealand, 7,264 miles in nine days, while a Ruby-throated Hummingbird may burn up a third of its tiny body weight to cross the Gulf of Mexico. The Red Knot, a small shorebird species, makes annual round-trips between Tierra del Fuego and the Canadian Arctic; one long-lived individual, named B95 (for the tag on its leg), has flown more miles than separate the Earth and the moon.

There is, however, one critical ability that human beings have

and birds do not: mastery of their environment. Birds can't protect wetlands, can't manage a fishery, can't air-condition their nests. They have only the instincts and the physical abilities that evolution has bequeathed them. These have served them well for a very long time, 150 million years longer than human beings have been around. But now human beings are changing the planet—its surface, its climate, its oceans—too quickly for birds to adapt by evolving. Crows and gulls may thrive at our garbage dumps, blackbirds and cowbirds at our feedlots, robins and bulbuls in our city parks. But the future of most bird species depends on our commitment to preserving them. Are they valuable enough for us to make the effort?

Value, in the late Anthropocene, has come almost exclusively to mean economic value, utility to human beings. And, certainly, many wild birds are usefully edible. Some of them in turn eat noxious insects and rodents. Many others perform vital roles—pollinating plants, spreading seeds, serving as food for mammalian predators—in ecosystems whose continuing wildness has touristic or carbon-sequestering value. You may also hear it argued that bird populations function, like the proverbial coal-mine canary, as important indicators of ecological health. But do we really need the absence of birds to

tell us when a marsh is severely polluted, a forest slashed and burned, or a fishery destroyed? The sad fact is that wild birds, in themselves, will never pull their weight in the human economy. They want to eat our blueberries.

What bird populations do usefully indicate the health of is our *ethical* values. One reason that wild birds matter—ought to matter—is that they are our last, best connection to a natural world that is otherwise receding. They're the most vivid and widespread representatives of the Earth as it was before people arrived on it. They share descent with the largest animals ever to walk on land: the house finch outside your window is a tiny and beautifully adapted living dinosaur. A duck on your local pond looks and sounds very much like a duck twenty million years ago, in the Miocene epoch, when birds ruled the planet. In an ever more artificial world, where featherless drones fill the air and Angry Birds can be simulated on our phones, we may see no reasonable need to cherish and support the former rulers of the natural realm. But is economic calculation our highest standard? After Shakespeare's King Lear steps down from the throne, he pleads with his elder two daughters to grant him some vestige of his former majesty. When the daughters reply that they don't see the need for it, the old king bursts out: "O, reason not the need!" To consign birds to oblivion is to forget what we're the children of.

A person who says, "It's too bad about the birds, but human beings come first" is making one of two implicit claims. The

person may mean that human beings are no better than any other animal—that our fundamentally self-centered selves, which are motivated by selfish genes, will always do whatever it takes to replicate our genes and maximize our pleasure, the nonhuman world be damned. This is the view of cynical realists, to whom a concern for other species is merely an annoying form of sentimentality. It's a view that can't be disproved, and it's available to anyone who doesn't mind admitting that he or she is hopelessly selfish.

But "human beings come first" may also have the opposite meaning: that our species is uniquely worthy of monopolizing the world's resources because we are *not* like other animals; because we have consciousness and free will, the capacity to remember our pasts and shape our futures. This opposing view can be found among both religious believers and secular humanists, and it, too, is neither provably true nor provably false. But it does raise the question: if we're incomparably more worthy than other animals, shouldn't our ability to discern right from wrong, and to knowingly sacrifice some small fraction of our convenience for a larger good, make us *more* susceptible to the claims of nature, rather than less? Doesn't a unique ability carry with it a unique responsibility?

If you stand in a forest in Southeast Asia, you may hear and then begin to feel, in your chest, a deep rhythmic whooshing. It sounds meteorological, but it's the wingbeats of Great Hornbills flying in to land in a fruiting tree. They have massive yellow bills and hefty white thighs; they look like a cross between a toucan and a giant panda. As they clamber around in the tree, placidly eating fruit, you may find yourself crying out with the rarest of all emotions: pure joy. It has nothing to do with what you want or what you possess. It's the sheer gorgeous fact of the Great Hornbill, which couldn't care less about you.

The radical otherness of birds is integral to their beauty and their value. They are always among us but never of us. They're the other world-dominating animals that evolution has produced, and their indifference to us ought to serve as a chastening reminder that we're not the measure of all things. The stories we tell about the past and imagine for the future are mental constructions that birds can do without. Birds live squarely in the present. And at present, although our cats and our windows and our pesticides kill billions of them every year, and although some species, particularly on oceanic islands, have been lost forever, their world is still very much alive. In every corner of the globe, in nests as small as walnuts or as large as haystacks, chicks are pecking through their shells and into the light.

the next man, I was following the story of the new stadium the Twin Cities are building for their football Vikings. The stadium's glass walls were expected to kill thousands of birds every year, and local bird lovers had asked its sponsors to use a specially patterned glass to reduce collisions; the glass would have raised the stadium's cost by one-tenth of one percent, and the sponsors had balked. Around the same time, the National Audubon Society issued a press release declaring climate change "the greatest threat" to American birds and warning that "nearly half" of North America's bird species were at risk of losing their habitats by 2080. Audubon's announcement was credulously retransmitted by national and local media, including the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, whose blogger on bird-related subjects, Jim Williams, drew the inevitable inference: Why argue about stadium glass when the *real* threat to birds was climate change? In comparison, Williams said, a few thousand bird deaths would be "nothing."

I was in Santa Cruz, California, and already not in a good mood. The day I saw the Williams quote was the two hundred and fifty-fourth of a year in which, so far, sixteen had qualified as rainy. To the injury of a brutal drought came the daily insult of radio forecasters describing the weather as beautiful. It wasn't that I didn't share Williams's anxiety about the future. What upset me was how a dire prophecy like Audubon's could lead to indifference toward birds in the present.

Maybe it's because I was raised as a Protestant and became

an environmentalist, but I've long been struck by the spiritual kinship of environmentalism and New England Puritanism. Both belief systems are haunted by the feeling that simply to be human is to be guilty. In the case of environmentalism, the feeling is grounded in scientific fact. Whether it's prehistoric North Americans hunting the mastodon to extinction, Maori wiping out the megafauna of New Zealand, or modern civilization deforesting the planet and emptying the oceans, human beings are universal killers of the natural world. And now climate change has given us an eschatology for reckoning with our guilt: coming soon, some hellishly overheated tomorrow, is Judgment Day. Unless we repent and mend our ways, we'll all be sinners in the hands of an angry Earth.

I'm still susceptible to this sort of puritanism. Rarely do I board an airplane or drive to the grocery store without considering my carbon footprint and feeling guilty about it.[1] But when I started watching birds, and worrying about their welfare, I became attracted to a countervailing strain of Christianity, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi's example of loving what's concrete and vulnerable and right in front of us. I gave my support to the focused work of the American Bird Conservancy and local Audubon societies. Even the most ominously degraded landscape could make me happy if it had birds in it.

And so I came to feel miserably conflicted about climate change. I accepted its supremacy as the environmental issue of our time, but I felt bullied by its dominance. Not only did it

make every grocery-store run a guilt trip; it made me feel selfish for caring more about birds in the present than about people in the future. What were the eagles and the condors killed by wind turbines compared with the impact of rising sea levels on poor nations? What were the endemic cloud-forest birds of the Andes compared with the atmospheric benefits of Andean hydroelectric projects?

A hundred years ago, the National Audubon Society was an activist organization, campaigning against wanton bird slaughter and the harvesting of herons for their feathers, but its spirit has since become gentler. In recent decades, it's been better known for its holiday cards and its plush-toy cardinals and bluebirds, which sing when you squeeze them, than for generating hard science, taking controversial positions, or partnering with groups that do real conservation work. When the organization shifted into apocalypse mode, last September, I wished that it had stuck with plush toys. Love is a better motivator than guilt.

In rolling out its climate-change initiative, Audubon alluded to the "citizen science data" it had mobilized, and to a "report," prepared by its own scientists, that justified its dire predictions. Visitors to its updated website were treated to images of climate-imperiled species, such as the Bald Eagle, and asked to "take the pledge" to help save them. The actions that Audubon suggested to pledge-takers were gentle stuff—tell your stories, create a bird-friendly yard—but the website also offered a "Climate Action Pledge," which was long and detailed and included things

like replacing your incandescent lightbulbs with lower-wattage alternatives.

The climate-change report was not immediately available, but from the website's graphics, which included range maps of various bird species, it was possible to deduce that the report's method involved a comparison of a species' present range with its predicted range in a climate-altered future. When there was broad overlap between the two ranges, it was assumed that the species would survive. When there was little or no overlap, it was assumed that the species would be caught between an old range that had grown inhospitable to it and a new range in which the habitat was wrong, and would be at risk of disappearing.

This kind of modeling can be useful, but it's fraught with uncertainties. A species may currently breed in a habitat with a particular average temperature, but this doesn't mean that it couldn't tolerate a higher temperature, or that it couldn't adapt to a slightly different habitat farther north, or that the more northerly habitat won't change as temperatures rise. North American species in general, having contended with blazing July days and frosty September nights as they evolved, are much more tolerant of temperature fluctuations than tropical species are. Although, in any given place, some familiar back-yard birds may have disappeared by 2080, species from farther south are likely to have moved in to take their place. North America's birdlife may well become more diverse, not less.

The Bald Eagle was an especially odd choice of poster bird

for Audubon's initiative. The species nearly became extinct fifty years ago, before DDT was banned. The only reason we can worry about its future today is that the public—led by the then energetic Audubon—rallied around an *immediate* threat to it. The eagle's plight was a primary impetus for the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and the eagle is one of the act's great success stories. Once its eggs were no longer weakened by DDT, its population and range expanded so dramatically that it was removed from the endangered-species list in 2007. The eagle rebounded because it's a resilient and resourceful bird, a generalist hunter and scavenger, capable of traveling long distances to colonize new territory. It's hard to think of a species less liable to be trapped by geography. Even if global warming squeezes it entirely out of its current summer and winter ranges, the melting of ice in Alaska and Canada may actually result in a larger new range.

But climate change is seductive to organizations that want to be taken seriously. Besides being a ready-made meme, it's usefully imponderable: while peer-reviewed scientific estimates put the annual American death toll of birds from collisions and from outdoor cats at more than three billion, no individual bird death can be definitively attributed to climate change, still less to any climate action that an ordinary citizen did or didn't take. (Local and short-term weather patterns are the chaotic product of a host of variables, and whether one person drives a Hummer or a Prius has nothing to do with them.) Although

you could demonstrably save the lives of the birds now colliding with your windows or being killed by your cats, reducing your carbon footprint even to zero saves nothing. Declaring climate change bad for birds is therefore the opposite of controversial. To demand stricter review of wind farms, to make sure they're not built directly in the path of millions of migrating birds, would alienate environmental groups that favor wind power at any cost. To take an aggressive stand against the overharvesting of horseshoe crabs (the real reason that the Red Knot, a shorebird, had to be put on the list of threatened U.S. species this winter) might embarrass the Obama administration, whose director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, in announcing the listing, laid the blame for the Red Knot's decline primarily on "climate change," a politically more palatable culprit. Climate change is everyone's fault—in other words, no one's. We can all feel good about deploring it.

There's no doubt that the coming century will be a tough one for wild animals. Even if climate scientists are wrong, and global temperatures miraculously stabilize tomorrow, we would still be facing the largest extinction event in sixty-five million years. What remains of the natural world is rapidly being destroyed by our rising population, by deforestation and intensive agriculture, by depletion of fisheries and aquifers, by pesticide and plastic pollution, and by the spread of invasive species. For countless species, including almost all of North America's birds, climate change is a more distant and secondary threat. The responses

of birds to acute climatic stress are not well studied, but birds have been adapting to such stresses for tens of millions of years, and they're surprising us all the time—Emperor Penguins relocating their breeding grounds as the Antarctic ice melts, Tundra Swans leaving the water and learning to glean grains from agricultural fields. Not every species will manage to adapt. But the larger and healthier and more diverse our bird populations, the greater the chances that many species will survive, even thrive. To prevent extinctions in the future, it's not enough to curb our carbon emissions. *We also have to keep a whole lot of wild birds alive right now*. We need to combat the extinctions that are threatened in the present, work to reduce the many hazards that are decimating North American bird populations, and invest in large-scale, intelligently conceived conservation efforts, particularly those designed to allow for climate change. These aren't the only things that people who care about nature should be doing. But it only makes sense *not* to do them if the problem of global warming demands the full resources of every single nature-loving group.

A little tragicomedy of climate activism is its shifting of goalposts. Ten years ago, we were told that we had ten years to take the kind of drastic actions needed to prevent global

temperatures from rising more than two degrees Celsius in this century. Today we hear, from some of the very same activists, that *we still have ten years*. In reality, our actions now would need to be even more drastic than they would have ten years ago, because further gigatons of carbon have accumulated in the atmosphere. At the rate we're going, we'll use up our entire emissions allowance for the century before we're even halfway through it. Meanwhile, the actions that many governments now propose are *less* drastic than what they proposed ten years ago.

A book that does justice to the full tragedy and weird comedy of climate change is *Reason in a Dark Time*, by the philosopher Dale Jamieson. Ordinarily, I avoid books on the subject, but a friend recommended it to me last summer, and I was intrigued by its subtitle, "Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed —and What It Means for Our Future." I was intrigued by the word *failed* in particular, the past tense of it. I started reading and couldn't stop.

Jamieson, an observer and participant at climate conferences since the early nineties, begins with an overview of humanity's response to the largest collective-action problem it has ever faced. In the twenty-three years since the Rio Earth Summit, at which hopes for a global agreement ran high, not only have carbon emissions not decreased; they've increased steeply. In Copenhagen, in 2009, President Obama was merely ratifying a fait accompli when he declined to commit the United States to binding targets for reductions. Unlike Bill Clinton, Obama

was frank about how much action the American political system could deliver on climate change: none. Without the United States, which is the world's second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, a global agreement isn't global, and other countries have little incentive to sign it. Basically, America has veto power, and we've exercised it again and again.

The reason the American political system can't deliver action isn't simply that fossil-fuel corporations sponsor denialists and buy elections, as many progressives suppose. Even for people who accept the fact of global warming, the problem can be framed in many different ways—a crisis in global governance, a market failure, a technological challenge, a matter of social justice, and so on—each of which argues for a different expensive solution. A problem like this (a "wicked problem" is the technical term) will frustrate almost any country, and it's particularly difficult to solve in the United States, where government is designed to be both weak and responsive to its citizens. Unlike the progressives who see a democracy perverted by moneyed interests, Jamieson suggests that America's inaction on climate change is the *result* of democracy. A good democracy, after all, acts in the interests of its citizens, and it's precisely the citizens of the major carbon-emitting democracies who benefit from cheap gasoline and global trade, while the main costs of our polluting are borne by those who have no vote: poorer countries, future generations, other species. The American electorate, in other words, is rationally self-interested. According to a

survey cited by Jamieson, more than sixty percent of Americans believe that climate change will harm other species and future generations, while only thirty-two percent believe that it will harm them personally.

Shouldn't our responsibility to other people, both living and not yet born, compel us to take radical action on climate change? The problem here is that it makes no difference to the climate whether any individual, myself included, drives to work or rides a bike. The scale of greenhouse-gas emissions is so vast, the mechanisms by which these emissions affect the climate so nonlinear, and the effects so widely dispersed in time and space, that no specific instance of harm could ever be traced back to my 0.0000001% contribution to emissions. I may abstractly fault myself for emitting way more than the global per capita average. But if I calculate the average annual carbon quota required to limit global warming to two degrees this century, I find that simply maintaining a typical American single-family home exceeds it in two weeks. Absent any indication of direct harm, what makes intuitive moral sense is to live the life I was given, be a good citizen, be kind to the people near me, and conserve as well as I reasonably can.

Jamieson's larger contention is that climate change is different in category from any other problem the world has ever faced. For one thing, it deeply confuses the human brain, which evolved to focus on the present, not the far future, and on readily perceivable movements, not slow and probabilistic developments. (When

Jamieson notes that "against the background of a warming world, a winter that would not have been seen as anomalous in the past is viewed as unusually cold, thus as evidence that a warming is not occurring," you don't know whether to laugh or to cry for our brains.) The great hope of the Enlightenment—that human rationality would enable us to transcend our evolutionary limitations—has taken a beating from wars and genocides, but only now, on the problem of climate change, has it foundered altogether.

I'd expected to be depressed by *Reason in a Dark Time*, but I wasn't. Part of what's mesmerizing about climate change is its vastness across both space and time. Jamieson, by elucidating our past failures and casting doubt on whether we'll ever do any better, situates it within a humanely scaled context. "We are constantly told that we stand at a unique moment in human history and that this is the last chance to make a difference," he writes in his introduction. "But every point in human history is unique, and it is always the last chance to make some particular difference."

This was the context in which the word *nothing*, applied to the particular difference that some Minnesotan bird lovers were trying to make, so upset me. It's not that we shouldn't care whether global temperatures rise two degrees or six this century, or whether the oceans rise twenty inches or twenty feet; the differences matter immensely. Nor should we fault any promising effort, by foundations or NGOs or governments, to mitigate

global warming or adapt to it. The question is whether everyone who cares about the environment is obliged to make climate the overriding priority. Does it make any practical or moral sense, when the lives and the livelihoods of millions of people are at risk, to care about a few thousand warblers colliding with a stadium?

To answer the question, it's important to acknowledge that drastic planetary overheating is a done deal. Even in the nations most threatened by flooding or drought, even in the countries most virtuously committed to alternative energy sources, no head of state has ever made a commitment to leaving any carbon in the ground. Without such a commitment, "alternative" merely means "additional"—postponement of human catastrophe, not prevention. The Earth as we now know it resembles a patient with bad cancer. We can choose to treat it with disfiguring aggression, damming every river and blighting every landscape with biofuel agriculture, solar farms, and wind turbines, to buy some extra years of moderated warming. Or we can adopt a course of treatment that permits a higher quality of life, still fighting the disease but protecting the areas where wild animals and plants are hanging on, at the cost of slightly hastening the human catastrophe. One advantage of the latter approach is that, if a miracle cure like fusion energy should come along, or if global consumption rates and population should ever decline, there might still be some intact ecosystems to save.

Choosing to preserve nature at potential human expense

would be morally more unsettling if nature still had the upper hand. But we live in the Anthropocene—in a world ever more of our own making. Near the end of Jamieson's chapter on ethics, he poses the question of whether it's a good thing or a bad thing that the arcadian Manhattan of 1630, lushly forested and teeming with fish and birds, became the modern Manhattan of the High Line and the Metropolitan Museum. Different people will give different answers. The point is that the change occurred and can't be undone, as global warming can't be undone. We were bequeathed a world of goods and bads by our forebears, and we'll bequeath a world of different goods and bads to our descendants. We've always been not only universal despoilers but brilliant adapters; climate change is just the same old story writ larger. The only self-inflicted existential threats to our species are nuclear war and genetically modified microorganisms.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.