EarthChild

Language, Power, and Symbolism
for a Planet in Crisis

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ISBN: 0975218905

Algebra

Floating dense ideas I
Spoke in ribbons
Danced the lightstep tangle of a
Formula, a digital parenthesis, a step/

…ellipsis punched our dialogue
Dropped questions
Framed a strung out
Conversation, summed affinity, stalled out.

Violet variables creased tongues
We craved an equals measure
And resolved to make it right.

Foreword

This is a book about family. It is the story of a mother, a child, and a journey far away from home. A story that rises in pre-history with the evolution of a dominant species, travels through time, and leads us back to the beginning. It is a book about lineage, love and loss.

The narrative wanders, catering to paths less well known as well as to old standards. It clambers over ecology's split pole fences, sprints over science creeks and delves into the deep woods of language, myth and magic. It shapeshifts with psychology, plays trills on sociology and dances with desire for better days.

This is also a book about hope in action. Hope based not on the outmoded ways of engaging with our planet, but in a changed relationship that starts with how we see ourselves. Hope that thrusts us forward with possibility, not backward toward an improbable future. Hope that is loud and bold, with a shifted vision for who we are, what we are doing here and how we can take responsibility for our impact on this third rock from the sun.

Chapter 1 Earthstate

Problematic progress

Before we cluster metaphors or contemplate a changing world, let us see where we are right now. This planet, this 'average' chunk of rock on the rim of a nondescript outposted galaxy—what of it? And why does it matter?

All living creatures adapt to and alter the environments in which they live. Plants break down soil as roots reach dumbly to the nearest source of nutrients; rodents burrow into hillsides; elephants strip foliage as they criss-cross the dry grass veldt. Environmental modification can be intentional as well as tangential; tools deliberately employed are not the sole domain of humans. Dolphins, otters, birds such as the woodpecker finch and several species of primate use implements to increase their odds of survival.

Humans, *homo sapiens sapiens*, have changed the Earth far more extensively than any other living organism. There are not enough snowflakes in a blizzard to count all the ways we have chiselled, dug, paved, piled, split, emptied, carved, corralled, hewn, sown or harvested our way to progress. We have built sky-hugging skyscrapers from earthbound ore, pumped rivers of refuse into (what we thought once) endless seas. We have concreted so much of our cities that some of us have forgotten how to run barefoot on grass; we have built shelters underground to shield us from our own belligerent madness. We have conquered diseases that

would have killed millions a century ago and we have tentatively set foot on the Moon.

This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the pros and cons of global warming or a treatise on the value of a woodchip or a tree. But let us take as a starting point three key assumptions to share on our journey (we'll build the others as we amble down the road):

- The earth is a different place (chemically, materially and atmospherically) than it was 200 years ago

- The Industrial Revolution and attendant acceleration of terrestrial change were a significant shift in the relationship of humans to our habitat

- Some of these changes can be attributed to human activity

There is much less disagreement over *whether* we have changed the planet than *how much* or what the consequences of this have been. As one researcher sums up:

> …the observed warming, especially that recorded over the last 30 years, can only be explained in our models when we consider the effect of rising concentrations of greenhouse gases that are

> influenced by human activities. Although some of the early twentieth-century warming would appear to be related to changing solar activity and although some of the nineteenth-century warming may be the result of natural internal processes in the climate system…the warming experienced since the 1970s can *only* be fully explained by the continuing rise in the concentration of carbon dioxide, methane and other human-related greenhouse gases.
>
> (p. 8, Hume 2002)

Taking that as a starting point, this chapter outlines the assumptions of change to water, soil, and air that have occurred *at least in part* due to human endeavor. It is a broad-brush scientific analysis, using conservative estimates where possible. The point is that improvements to health, technology, and living standards for some have not eliminated global negative consequences that are worsening every year.

Ecologists often refer to the Earth as a closed system. Simply, this means the environment that supports our survival is one big recycling plant. It is a giant game of musical chairs, where water, air, and soil jockey for changes of state, geographical redistribution, and sustainable use. That is where we come in, and where it is time to face the music.

Barring sudden discovery of time travel, science fiction to fact wormholes as transport corridors or a friendly visit from an advanced alien race, we're unlikely to be graced with easy answers any time soon. Just as the oceans, land, and sky renew and reinvent themselves through closed circuits, we'll have to take our chances with what we have already got. In other words, this (for the moment) is all there is. (And for those who'd argue that asteroid mining is just around the corner, offering mineral wealth and possibly new sources of water—point taken. But we're not there yet, and that is only part of a potential technological solution to our planetary woes.) With our raw resource use, manufacturing, population growth, and almost universally accepted market economy, we have skipped blindly into an alley that is dark, dank and potentially dangerous.

Planetary formation & geological timescales

The solar system, and others like it in the universe, began as a spinning gas and dust cloud. Gravitational force, binding agent of galaxies and planetary systems, pulled the center of this solar nebula into itself. As it contracted, the middle of the cloud heated up, flattened and began rotating faster. Picture a pizza chef with a ball of dough on her fist—as she spins the dough, the crust thins and spreads out, with the center remaining thicker than the rest. Continuing to fall in and condense, nebula eventually contains enough consolidated material to become a protosun, surrounded by a much less dense haze of remaining gas and dust. From contraction to protostar in just 100,000 years.

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Thanks!