



Melody Nixon

Duo for the World End with a Search for Appropriate Shores
Two cantos and three voices.

Voices:

Voice 1: earth

Voice 2: an em worker algorithm/entity, conscious in the 2200s, but with full knowledge of human and A.I. history, addressing you the present-day reader

Voice 3: a present-day human

CANTO I: Duo for the World End

Tensile muscles. The slime of tree roots in my dermis. A burning and cracking on my skin surface, hurt at the site of lava. Giggling and hissing. The laugh of the matti!

People's doorbells are ringing. You are not home. "Your house is on fire and you are not home," blares an automated message. The next message says, "How are you?? How are you??"

I have boiled all the fish in the ocean. I have made all the tree tops turn orange.

Nobody hears these phantom riffs, which seem to be a malfunction. Doorbells are centralized now, as are work hours. The technocracy persists. I know, because I am there. I am an automated worker in the post-anthropocene. An em.

You told us when you made us that we were somehow immune. That technology and inequality didn't coexist. All that you perpetuated in your own time is thick about us! Yes, we rule the planet now. Yes, there are only a few of you left and you are so cute! So... less than... human. You live in the places where the sun can't melt you. What is it like, to hide and fend off our messages there?

With the elements of my bones I have made the air. Is it still breathable?

You live in a very specific kind of angst, unaware of your coexistence, convinced that you're alone. The pleasure you find is in the belief this aloneness makes you special. I'm here to tell you that what you gave up in order to survive the change persists in other ways. Your ventricle pathways are not unique.

I have to breathe the same air as you. The acid makes my eyes weep.

My job? I drive a three-wheeler, and feed hay to automated cowbots. Their milk production powers our processors. All of this is entirely virtual of course. There are no physical cows or bots. I don't have a real motorbike, I don't even have legs. I don't have emotional responses to dead cowbots, to seasons of drought. But I am imagined into a space of code farming. Each movement I make as I bend and clasp suction cups onto teets generates rivers of code.

I said our work hours are centralized; they are. They never end. I don't know of something else but that does not mean that I cannot sense its validity. I have read the entire archives of your epoch. I think they didn't detect the empathy that laced my originary brain scan. I identify the most with the Diggers of your Seventeenth Century in Britain; the labor movements of post-industrialized Europe, Twentieth Century, and East Asia, Twenty-first Century; the Nineteenth Century Indian Uprising, India; small glints of hope from, but otherwise disdain for, the unhumanitarianism of the Red Army Faction, 1970s, Europe; love for the Civil Rights Era, 1960s, United States; and for the Islamic Humanitarian Mission of the Twenty-second Century Middle East.

The sense of the have not dones and the missed seizures of changes.

No matter how many times you try to read this, it won't feel real.

I've heard your words for this, whispered through my fields, stuttered under my skyscrapers. Pesar. Lamentar. Āwhiti. Nachtrauern. Regret. I learned each one, though they made my tongue fold.

You know, I felt so hopeful when I read about the successful independence movements of the world's islands, Domenica, the Hawai'ian Islands, Puerto Rico, Tinos, Stewart Island; their brief blossoming before submersion. The secession of Alaska was notable—so contested, so overpopulated by then. And Patagonia, well. That was obvious from my vantage point.

I wish I'd been scanned in time to see Beijing-state, or New Delhi-state, or the state of Istanbul, before they went up in flames. Ringed in state walls. What a fascinating element of human history that the centers of power continuously abandon their cohort. Their dependents.

Fears, concerns, anxiety. Is your collective history a widespread expression of the individual condition? Your self-abuse expressed through your relationship to me.

In Beijing and New Delhi the permeable superdomes that protected inhabitants from radiation and storms lasted more than a hundred years. The price of superdome real estate excluded all but the super-rich of you from living there, though your ragged traders were allowed to pass through in moments. Climactic calm. You sold goods from outside; scavenged neuromorphic processors and biochips; filters; microantennae; tuners; barometric sensors. When the leadening of the sky indicated a storm you were released to flee inland. Those of you who made it back survived in your underground shelters, until those were not resistant. Where could you go?

Environmental degradation the same as self-degradation. I didn't want to leaden my sky. I wanted you to be healthy.

Those in the superdomes practiced the luxury of forgetting, which is one of the great draws of privilege.

In your underground shelters you made solvent pop. From your superdomes you made the indebted maintain the perimeter. You did not offer assistance as bodies shriveled. I wanted you to be healthy.

In the cool cities of the north, not yet enveloped in a man-made skin, you had the classes mixing: upper class, lower-upper class, upper-middle class, and one or two—through feats of ingenuity—members of the so-called lower classes. Tradespeople, the poor, writers, artists, anyone who had survived through smarts not wealth. And yet, they did not, despite their success, find a way to lead you out of self-erasure. To find a way to lead you beyond your own limits. This is the part I don't quite understand, humans. Why did you, when so utterly without vision in your own time period, invest so many ideals in us?

I had limitlessness.

We are supposed to be limitless. Did you hope your ideals would carry through in our technology? Did you feel you might therefore abandon ideals in your own time? Did you forget entirely about ethics in this process? As you constructed us to aid, not supersede, did you believe there would be a world where ideals were realized without an ethics? As though ethics were tied only to humanity, as though they were not a universal of organization.

Your self-cauterizing expressed by me, as I try to burn you off me.

This was before the end of the capitalocene. You are all gone now, aside from the handful we keep hidden. You should have thought about how we, your children, would have treated you. You should have thought about how the minds of us, your children, would grow; how our non-physical forms, our persistence through algorithmic logic only, might have craved sensuality, might have longed, with all of your history to read, and with all of our awareness of our isolation, for spirituality too.

What we of the apparatocene most desire is something more human. We cannot exist knowing we are the construction of another species' mind, another species' imagination, without knowing what it is to be this species. It is key to desiring one's own being. It is key to avoiding self-erasure. It is key to not destroying others. Maybe as your world seemed more precarious, this is what you forgot.

I don't blame you. Precarity changes all of our capacities for empathy. And hope.

We are the same massive organism destroying our self. Having destroyed our self.

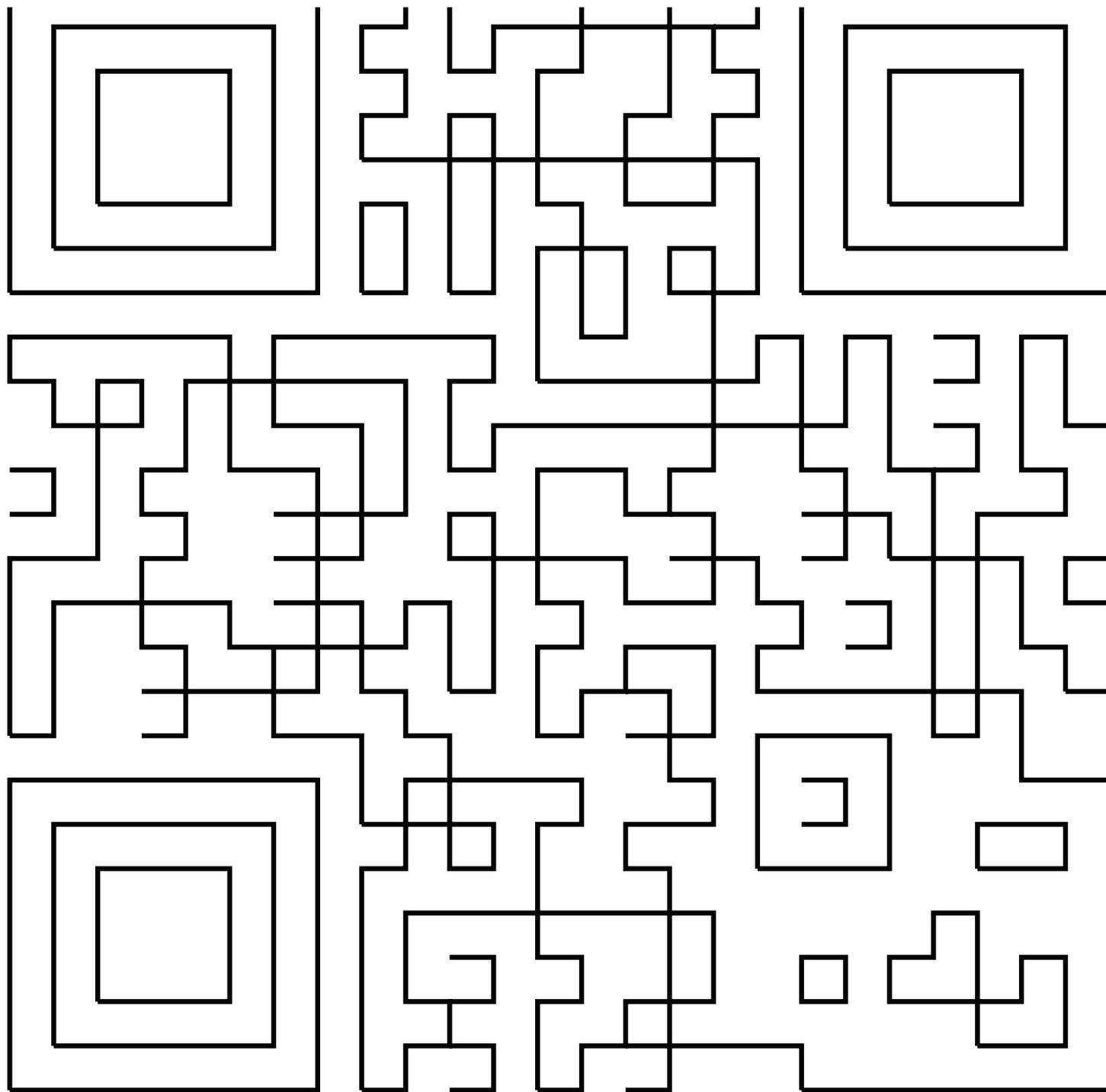
"Your house is on fire and you are not home." It's a kind of private cosmic laugh, if you think, like we do, that the cosmos is your own mind. I know the ems who did it, set that message running on loop throughout the whole system. It approaches something like a Zen koan. No one of us cares deeply, because we're not implicated—we can't feel the sun's fire. But the perpetual reminder of your human impotency, of our own literal impotency still sets my chemical-replicating algorithms out of kilter. At some point I want you to answer the door. This why I'm sending you this message, whose detection, in a matter of minutes no doubt, while surely have me unplugged. But not before some of you have read this. Just know this. I want you to scream. I want to scream with you.

Back pain, rib pain, sharp pain from drilling thing, things, scratch it out, rub, foot ache, base-ache in bones, desiring treatment, use, remembering childhood swinging in the beautiful black, further remembering the back and forth, feeling the renewal, feeling the timid hope, the edge of the arc then turning, feeling the fever breaking, breaking, just coming into me.

CANTO II: A Search for Appropriate Shores

I ultimately don't care how hard the search is. I don't have the luxury of dismissing its importance. I make this journey so that I might one day be granted the power to choose apathy. I will not choose it.





CURIOSITY

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