

The fact that “natural” is no longer a dirty word is amazing . . .

Change Rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*

I see Venus and Jupiter, and they rise above the horizon as close siblings. Venus sits to the left and Jupiter to the right. Venus appears large and warm, while distance diminishes Jupiter's scale, and the largest planet in our solar system glows cool. In the night sky, a chorus of stars and constellations join these planets. Our waning moon brings more light, and a shooting star streaks. I make a wish and keep my eyes fixed upwards. I want to see more flashes; I have so many wishes, and I see another glow advancing with swiftness. Constancy and steadiness temper its speed. Confusion strikes, and I grasp that I am not gazing at an asteroid pushing through the atmosphere but a satellite in low earth orbit. It, too, imparts wonder. An astronomer tells me to look out for the space station, and a mobile app foretells its imminent crossing.

Now I am climbing a hill where prickly pear cacti, cypress trees, and towering umbrella pines line the rocky path. The sun shines intensely and illuminates shades of green, dark and light, warm and cool, and those that mark greater and lesser fertility. I turn my head to spy the cooing dove. She is resting on the ground with relaxed wings, and her peacefulness transcends. I continue walking, and my body jerks and jumps as a dark and violet form escapes my sandaled feet. A snake, not more than sixty centimeters, slides into the brush. I am unsettled, and I am frightened.

The dove and serpent mark my day just as celestial bodies and rocketed satellites mark the night.

This is the state of our anthropocene age: human development has marked our planet in such multiple and profound ways that the natural world and human world are now inextricably intertwined. We cannot understand one without knowing the other. Climate change is real, and humans are the cause. Smallpox has been eradicated. Passenger pigeons, too, no longer darken the skies. Roads and power lines traverse earth's surface. The ways in which these two worlds intersect and become one are innumerable.

Yet, in this new age, there is an insistence on marking their separation. Nature is our paradise lost, and we yearn for its reemergence and its existence. Governmental agencies demarcate official areas of wilderness. Manufacturers advertise the benefits of *natural* sodas. Biologists and ecologists team with filmmakers to produce wildlife documentaries. Reality television shows depict humans surviving in the wild. Markets offer diverse heirloom tomatoes alongside genetically-modified produce. The backpacker seeks solitude and respite in wilderness, and a family retreats to a mountain cabin. Students study Thoreau's *Walden Pond* and imagine Nature's transcendence.

Space is the final frontier, and it is also one marked by humans. Eons ago, an asteroid hurtled through the atmosphere and permanently marked the earth. Not even a nuclear detonation compares to its impact.

James H. Kao
Elba, Italy