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AFTER COVID-19, WILL NATURE TAKE OVER?

Alan Weisman's "The World Without Us" imagines what Earth would be like if everyone vanished.

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Hunkering down in New York City—with its once crowded streets, bridges, and offices now relatively empty—a canyon dweller at home could do worse than to read Alan Weisman’s “The World Without Us.” The book, a best-seller when it was published, in 2007, sought to understand what Earth would look like if everyone vanished. “Say a *Homo sapiens*-specific virus—natural or diabolically nano-engineered—picks us off but leaves everything else intact,” he wrote. What then?

Weisman, who is seventy-three years old, has been waiting out the pandemic at his home, in rural western Massachusetts. (The local farmers’ stands now operate unmanned, on the honor code.) When the outbreak began, he had been working on a book about hope amid ecological collapse, but his research plans—involving travel to Europe, Asia, and Africa—were put on hold. Instead, he has been fielding questions from people who find “The World Without Us” oddly apt, and going on hikes.

The other day, the weather was crisp, and the sky blue, except for some wispy clouds. Weisman headed for the Rivulet Trail, which runs through one of New England's few remaining stands of old-growth trees. He had put on jeans, a hoodie, and hiking boots—all doused in permethrin to guard against ticks, which have appeared in the area as the climate has warmed. He added a cap over his graying hair, a bandanna around his neck.

One of the most dramatic chapters in “The World Without Us” describes how quickly nature would reclaim New York City if humans were removed. The decay would likely begin from below. Every day, the M.T.A. pumps millions of gallons of water out of the subway system; if the pumps stopped, within half an hour tunnels would begin to flood. Soil under pavement would leach away. Streets would buckle. Within two decades, Lexington Avenue would likely turn into a river. Grand Central might stand for centuries, but skyscrapers would soon topple. Airborne seeds, deposited in bird droppings, would spread vegetation that could tear apart riveted steel high above. Down below, weeds, and then trees, would rip through pavement. “The unstated but absolutely resonant message throughout that book is how important maintenance personnel are to make sure that these things don't fall victim to entropy,” Weisman said. He had veered onto a path called Pine Loop.

Since the pandemic began, people have been citing “The World Without Us” online—posting references to it alongside images of flowers pushing through cobblestone, deer in Grand Rapids, a coyote in Chicago. Friends e-mailed Weisman clips of goats taking over a town in Wales, and schools of fish visible in the canals of Venice. A buddy in Colorado had heard reports of elk, moose, and mountain lions in Boulder and Denver; another sent Weisman's wife a photo of wild turkeys in a New Jersey housing project, noting, “Your husband will understand.”

Weisman was particularly touched by people who reported that they were hearing more birds. Someone in New Orleans had shared a recording. “It was a barred owl,” he said. “They have always been there, always calling, but now you don't have any cars making all that noise.” (Across the globe, the drop in traffic is seismically measurable: we are literally moving Earth less.)

He stopped in a clearing. A pine had fallen, and was decaying amid a bed of sugar-maple and birch leaves. “I don't think nature is avenging itself,” he said. “We are having an impact in ways that we can't predict, because there are so many variables in the ecosystem, but until something happens we just keep forging ahead in a bubble of denial.” The coronavirus, like deer ticks (now found as far north as the Arctic), may prove to be one of many new invisible threats. He glanced up. “It looks just

like the blue sky when I was a kid, and yet there is thirty per cent more carbon dioxide above my head,” he said.

Two other hikers appeared. Their faces were uncovered. Weisman raised his bandanna. “The governor of Massachusetts wants us to do that,” he said. The passing hikers silently half waved.

On the trail, there was a lookout with a plaque featuring a poem by William Cullen Bryant—“The Yellow Violet”—about valuing small natural wonders over “the ways of pride.” Stopping near the plaque, Weisman reflected on his new book project, and on how hard it is to sustain hope when environmental problems cast such a terrifying shadow over the future. “We’re going to have to figure out how to make it through what happens next,” he said. Below him, in a ravine, a stream snaked among old cherry and white pine. Taking in the glimmer of Earth’s untouched past, he said, “Utterly gorgeous.” ♦

A GUIDE TO THE CORONAVIRUS

- Twenty-four hours at the epicenter of the pandemic: nearly fifty *New Yorker* writers and photographers fanned out to document life in New York City on April 15th.
- Seattle leaders let scientists take the lead in responding to the coronavirus. New York leaders did not.
- Can survivors help cure the disease and rescue the economy?
- What the coronavirus has revealed about American medicine.
- Can we trace the spread of COVID-19 and protect privacy at the same time?
- The coronavirus is likely to spread for more than a year before a vaccine is widely available.
- How to practice social distancing, from responding to a sick housemate to the pros and cons of ordering food.
- The long crusade of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the infectious-disease expert pinned between Donald Trump and the American people.
- What to read, watch, cook, and listen to under quarantine.