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“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are headed.”

Lao Tzu

Chris Tille's artwork 2297 is an exercise in futurism: stitching together research from the Berlin Institute for Population and Development with real-world detailed map data from the Suomi NPP satellite, he makes a map of the Earth at night in the year 2297. Despite being a projection of the future, the result is, of course, still recognisable to us. The boundaries of land meeting water are demarcated by the contrast between black and white, and metropolises are lit up like heat maps. Still, subtle changes call for our investigation.

Coastal megacities have been ceded to rising waters, population density has stagnated, nations once known as “emerging” have more fully developed. There are visible traces of trends already in progress, with the common thread that all the visible changes are those that affect mankind—what shows up at night is only that which is lit.

Futurists do more than offer us a data-based projection of time. They also pose the implicit question: Is this what you want, or do you want to change direction? In 2297, Tille works at a global scale, allowing us to imagine our future as we humans experience societal and terrestrial shifts. It is a simple, though not easy, thought experiment to reflect on the future. If we could read a map of time as easily as we can read a map of space, would we find ourselves on the desired course?

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Rejecting Extinction

On a warm July morning in 2297, Thorfinn Sangala throws open the bedroom windows of his Falu-red wooden house on the Nuuk fjord. Still slightly sleepy, he blinks at the North Atlantic and takes a lungful of the salty air that is blown across the sea by the westerlies. Like most Greenlanders, Sangala lives in a house that seems ancient: one-and-a-half stories, with a saddle roof and divided-light windows that give the house the appearance of wanting to beam at all its visitors. The little towns line the fjords along the south-eastern coast, from Nanortalik to Upernavik. Nine million people now live on this, the largest island on earth. With its fresh Atlantic climate, vast pine and birch forests and endless summer nights, Greenland has not only become one of the most popular holiday destinations on earth, but also popular as a place to put down roots. Fewer than four billion people still live on earth. Their predecessors had to master enormous crises – and now the planet and its residents have finally found peace.

Thorfinn Sangala, who is approaching his eighties, is a typical Greenlandic. His great-great-great-great-grandparents, Shreemoti Dalit from Bangladesh and Yasan Qahtan from Yemen, were stranded on Greenland in 2071. At that time, the government had authorised 6,000 refugees to settle and populate the largely empty areas of the island. A cyclone had sucked large swathes of the Bangladesh coastline into the Bay of Bengal and left millions homeless. In Yemen, an endless tribal war had been raging in order to determine control of the water reserves. Shreemoti and Yasan met on the journey from Cyprus to Greenland. A short time later, they married in accordance with Muslim tradition.

The immigrants quickly learned to speak the native Inuktitut Creole, an offshoot of old Eskimo Greenlandic with Bengali, Arabic, English, Hausa and Swahili influences. They came from all over the world and brought with them their own languages as a little piece of home.

In 2297, seven generations after the first New Greenlanders settled in the country, the descendants of the native Kalaallit only make up 2% of the country's population. Greenland has changed in many other ways, too – Greenland is now actually green. While the average global temperature has risen 4.6°C since the new millennium, Greenland experienced an increase of over 9°C. The island has now lost two-thirds of its ice sheet from the 20th century, equating to nearly two million cubic kilometres of ice. The world's sea levels have risen by 4.5 metres. For Greenland's coastal towns, that isn't a problem because, despite the rising sea level, the towns are being pushed further and further away from the beaches. Greenland is known as a 'climbing island' because the weight of the glaciers is continuing to decrease and the land mass underneath is slowly lifting up out of the North Atlantic. Geologists predict that this process will continue for several centuries to come.

Climate change altered the face of the planet beyond recognition in other places, too. Neither the Maldives nor Sylt survived to see the year 2297. Many of the 20th century's coastal megacities also didn't make it; Shanghai, Tokyo, New York and London lost district after district to the sea. Those most heavily affected were the cities that sprang up out of the Sea of China during the Chinese economic miracle at the turn of the millennium.

However, the people of earth in 2297 now rarely have problems with climate change. This is because there are now just under four billion of them left. In the 21st century, the numbers of children born decreased – not just in Europe, but everywhere – with the result that the global population stopped growing. On 9 October 2083, the United Nations officially and symbolically declared the newborn Yousouf Arabagh from Kano, a northern micronation of what used to be Nigeria, global citizen number 9,173,391,677 – and thus the last child to contribute towards global population growth.

Thorfinn and Smilla took over their parents' vineyard after they retired from the business at the age of 90. Greenland is not only able to feed itself but is also one of the last areas in the world where ice wine (snöviinni) can be made because the clear winter nights mean that the temperatures can often fall below freezing. The vintners predominantly plant the *Sémillon* and *Merlot* varieties, whose genes have been modified to contain the substance resveratrol, which slows the progress of cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Greenlandic wines, crossed to form hybrids with active substances, have almost attained the status of a medical product. The grapes thrive on the loamy, sandy scree left behind by the melting glaciers. As such, the Greenlandic vintners are now working under similar conditions to the Romans four millennia before, followed by the French, who planted their Bordeaux wines in the *Médoc*. The long wine-growing tradition on the banks of the *Gironde* finally came to an end in 2135. The rising sea levels first infiltrated the soil with saltwater and then the left bank was swept away entirely, all the way to the Atlantic coast.

The remaining four billion people on earth at the end of the 23rd century decided to settle where life was good. They are well educated and can adapt to the environmental changes triggered by their ancestors, or withstand them. They are also a fair bit older and therefore more peaceful and conservative. Warmongering seems absurd to them because every single war comes at such a high human cost. Even the computer-guided warfare of the late 21st century lost its appeal when it became clear that the possession of land and resources was no longer logical in an economy that was becoming less and less materialistic.

Humans have long given up growth as the purpose of their economy. They use fewer resources than are created by natural cycles. They live in a global ecosystem that absorbs more carbon dioxide than its residents produce. They allow much of the eroded and contaminated agricultural and industrial land to turn into secondary biotopes – as playgrounds of evolution, where new species can come to life. After a long, long crisis, humans have finally arrived in a paradise of sustainability.

