

*“Ascension, A Novel:
A Reading/Presentation of an Image-Text Novel in Progress”*

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Ascension is a story of nature as it was. And is. And might become. It is the story of how our changing conception of nature, and the means we use to depict it, change the “natural.” And ourselves. It is the story of how we continually remake the world in our own image and in turn are remade by it. *Ascension* hopscotches across three eras—the time just before Darwin changes human nature, the 1980s just before the digital and genetic revolution, and today—three cultures set in three different versions of the natural world, and all on the brink of vanishing. It is the story of humans yearning to understand their families, themselves, and the world they live in as it comes to an end, leaving them to anticipate what will follow.

Ascension opens with a 19th century, natural philosopher struggling to read the natural history of a Divinely created world just before evolution, photography, and other modern ideas and technologies change the very meaning of Nature. The novel then jumps to 1980 and the “Jane Goodall” of feather-lice, an entomologist who brings her perspective to the male-dominated study of birds and is ridiculed for suspecting that dinosaurs had feathers. She knows that the time she has to make a contribution to her field is running out as the methods she’d honed over a lifetime are being driven into extinction by the gene sequencing that is coming into existence. The filmmaker documenting her fieldwork also finds his world coming to a close through the introduction of hand-held videotape-cameras, while the analog world of film-making (and biology) is about to be replaced by the digital technologies that shape so much of life today.

Finally: our post-biological moment—the Anthropocene—in a near future distinctly contingent with today. “Nature” has been supplanted by “environment” while genetic engineering, and data-mining dominate the way we understand it. Mary, a lab director, assembles a team of men and women full of their own hopes to develop a vaccine before a predicted pandemic hits, or another lab beats them to it. Her military funding, corporate partners, and the personal relationships that develop make it increasingly clear that knowledge is very much the product of the humans looking for it—and our interconnected, global world.

The story of each era grows out of those that have come before it, composing a novel of “emergence” where many small interactions create large-scale patterns, be they in a person’s life, society, the climate, or historical developments. *Ascension* is ultimately a story of the changing nature of Nature: a hybrid image-text of science fiction, literary fiction, essay, and meditation on life in the 21st century that asks us to consider how we, the earth, its plants and animals, have already changed by reminding us what they had been in the past. Using depictions of the natural world—from 19th century engraving to 20th century video to 21st century data bases, *Ascension* tells a story of the story we tell ourselves about ourselves and the natural world, from the first realizations that we are both *of* nature, as well as *in* nature, to the sharpening awareness that we cannot *escape* nature: our fates are bound together even if our actions repeatedly usher in a kind of end-time(s).