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The Galway Questions: A Strategic Foresight Process

Matt Finch – mechanicaldolphin.com

This document offers a structured way for readers to think through situations of strategic uncertainty.

When it's not clear what is going on around us and how events might play out, it provides a simple, accessible basis for fresh thinking, analysis, and judicious action.

The structure is designed to be scalable – you can spend as long as you want, or as long as the situation allows, on each question.

It's designed to be flexible, adaptable, and relatively agnostic – you can integrate your own preferred methods, tools, and approaches.

It's designed to be iterative – you may find, as you reach a later question, that it prompts thoughts which send you to revisit one of your earlier responses.

It's designed, above all, to be useful as a "starter kit": written in plain language and focussed on benefit to the user, a practical tool which can be applied and interpreted in different ways.

It can also be used to hone and revise an existing foresight output or process.

This way of thinking stems from the Oxford tradition of scenario planning, and is influenced by other writers and thinkers too. There is a section with references and further reading at the end.

Take the questions, and see what you can do with them.

1. Why now?

Discuss and agree what makes a strategic foresight process necessary at the present time. Consider the external or internal, strategic, organisational, or contextual issues which mean you see the need to reckon with uncertainty and test your sense of what the future holds.

2. What's going on?

3. What does it mean for us?

4. What can we do about it?

These three questions establish your current understanding of the situation and your options.

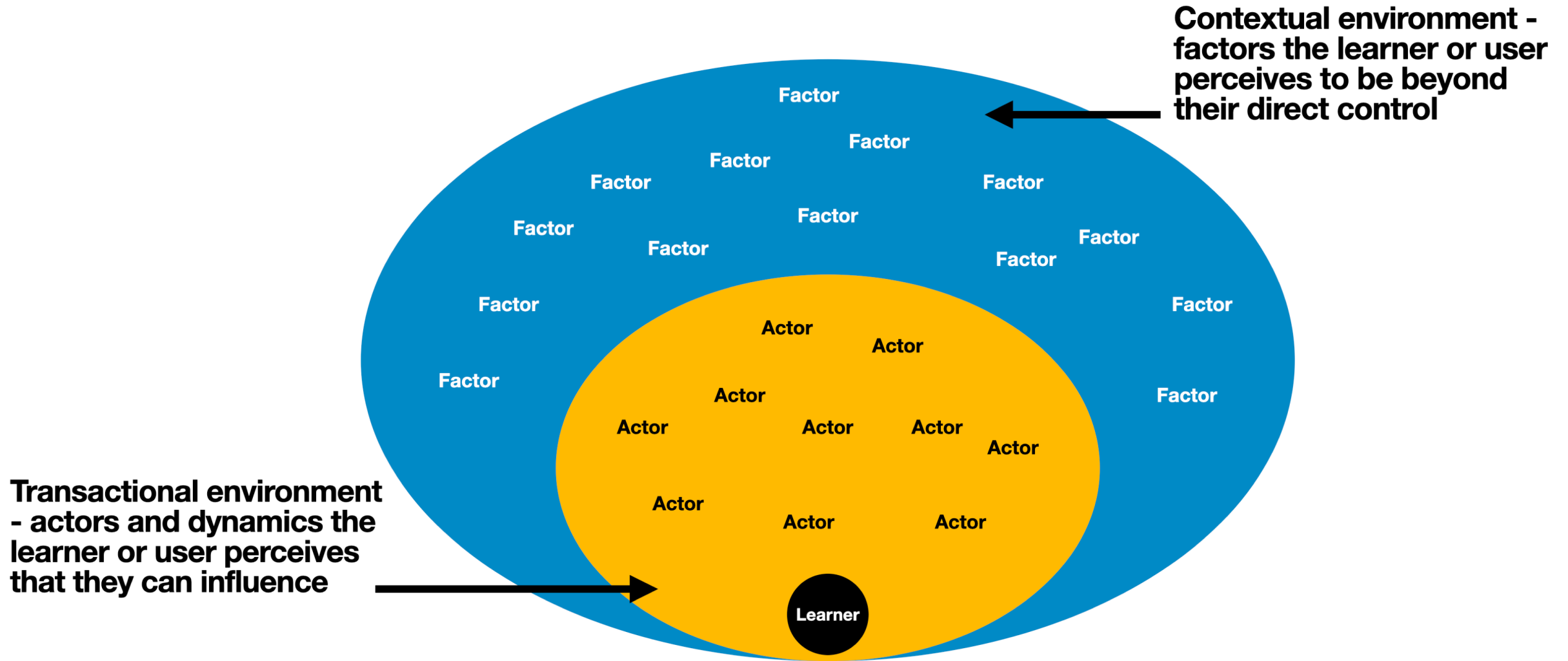
5. Where do we have influence?

6. What seems beyond our control?

These two questions establish where you perceive yourself to have agency in your environment, and what you see beyond the limits of that agency.

Following the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach, we can answer questions 5 and 6 by mapping an “island” of our relationships, populated by other actors like institutions, companies, and communities.

This is surrounded by a “sea” of uncertainties which take the form of factors which seem to be beyond our direct control.



Adapted from Ramirez et al., 2017

The map is really a diagram of our perceived agency in the here-and-now.

It is best developed iteratively and through debate: you can discuss, dispute, and decide where the limits of your island lie and what level of detail is useful.

Think hard about who is on your island: all of the actors you interact with as you go about your business. Someone will be obvious, some less so. Some may be hidden in plain sight and easily overlooked.

To make the map usable, you may want to group some actors. Discuss and decide the groups, considering what level of detail will make this a useful guide to your island.

The factors in the sea of uncertainty affect the decisions of other actors on your island, but seem to be beyond your own control.

They could be huge factors that affect the entire island like climate change, geopolitics, or macroeconomics.

They could be technical factors like the capabilities of artificial intelligence.

They could be very specific and local uncertainties that affect only a few actors on your island.

When it comes to the future of our island...

7. What do we currently hope?

8. What do we fear?

9. What do we actually expect?

These three questions invite you to express what you currently think might happen on your island in times to come.

10. How could the sea come ashore beyond our hopes, fears, and expectations?

Here, we play out uncertainties into the future, imagining how the island could be redrawn in ways we hadn't previously considered.

We can imagine factors in the sea of uncertainty coming ashore in different strengths, directions, and combinations, transforming the island, its actors, and relationships.

As the aim is to help users perceive their strategic situation anew, we want to devise future islands which usefully challenge our answers to questions 2-4 and 7-9.

If we're trying to be useful, we need to go beyond the benchmark of what we already understand – and what we already hope, fear, and expect.

It's important to go far enough into the future that the sea of uncertainty thoroughly transforms the island. Don't be afraid of a distant time horizon: often we have to go out a long way to really challenge current assumptions.

What we see in an apparently implausible and distant future may turn out to be just around the corner – but we'll only see it if we venture out far enough to imagine such profound changes.

You should create multiple islands showing different possible futures. Ensure that each future island takes place in the same timeframe, so that they are properly comparable.

Strive for elegance – just create enough future islands to prompt fresh thinking and re-assessment of what is going on and what might yet transpire.

Remember we're not thinking about "best case" and "worst case" scenarios – lay aside judgment temporarily and simply focus on creating futures which challenge current assumptions.

Describe each future island, its roles and dynamics. Think about what will make that description useful – what sort of things do you need to know about each future?

You can use structured and systematic methods to develop your islands – considering, for example, how factors in the sea of uncertainty might affect each other in a pattern of cause and effect.

You can draw on projections and models, apply a specific creative approach, or go about the work more intuitively, allowing for a degree of trial and error.

It depends on what is needed to make the work plausible for its users. But you can be very imaginative in your use of tools.

Even an old painting can help us think about our turbulent times.

Like this:

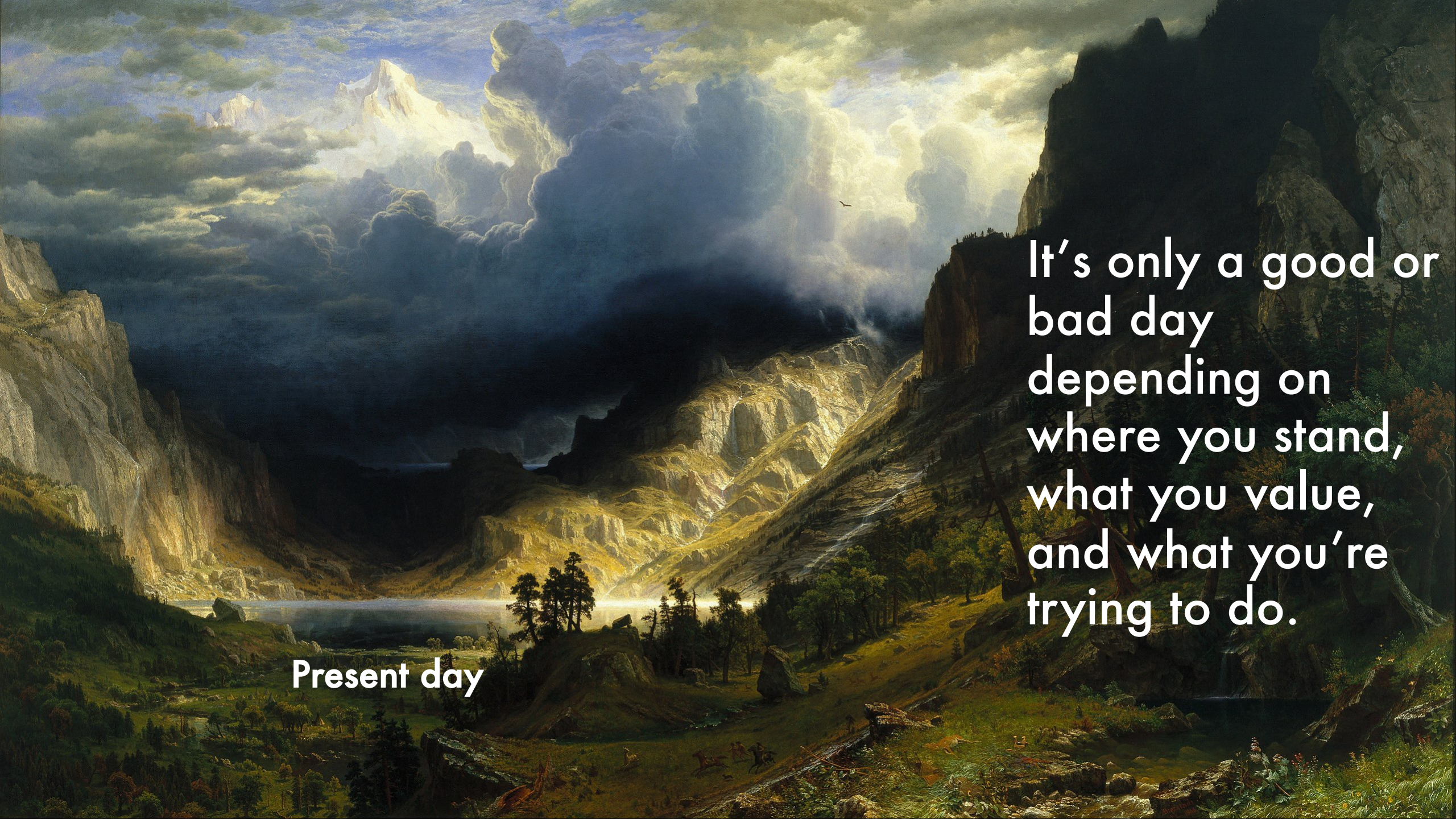


A Storm in the Rocky Mountains – Mt. Rosalie, Albert Bierstadt, 1866



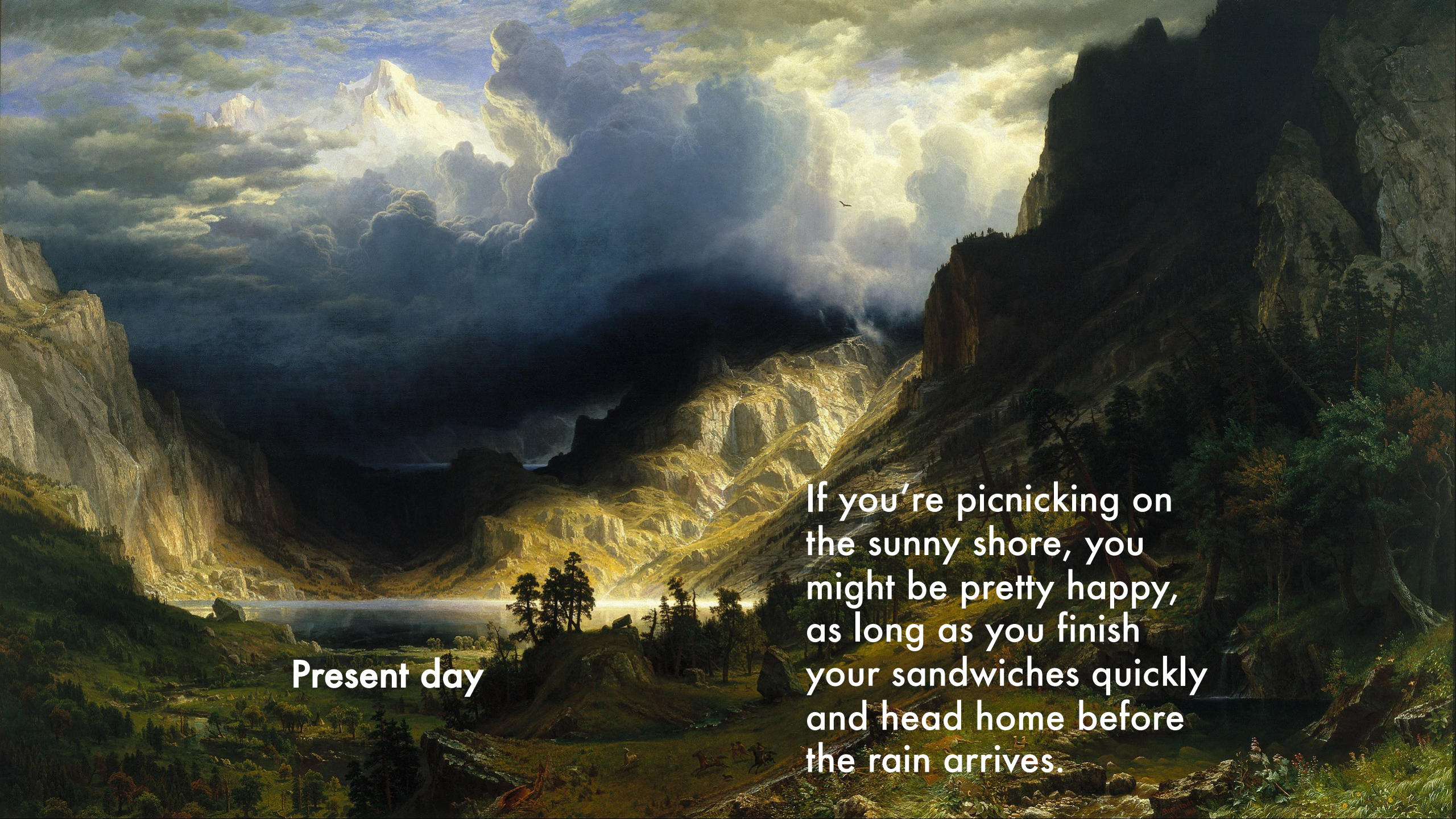
Here we are in the
present day,
facing conditions
of turbulence and
uncertainty.

Present day



It's only a good or
bad day
depending on
where you stand,
what you value,
and what you're
trying to do.

Present day



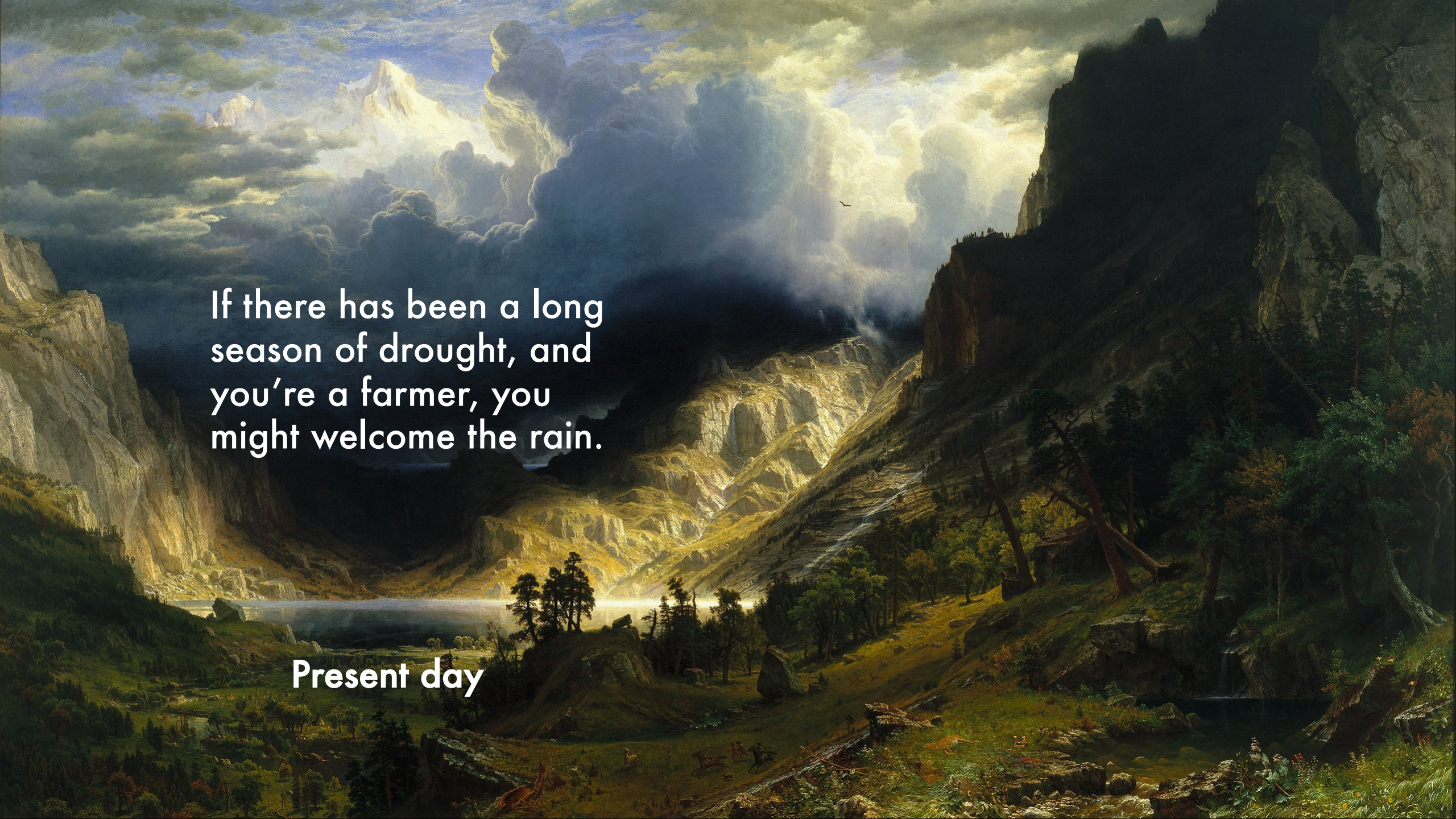
Present day

If you're picnicking on the sunny shore, you might be pretty happy, as long as you finish your sandwiches quickly and head home before the rain arrives.



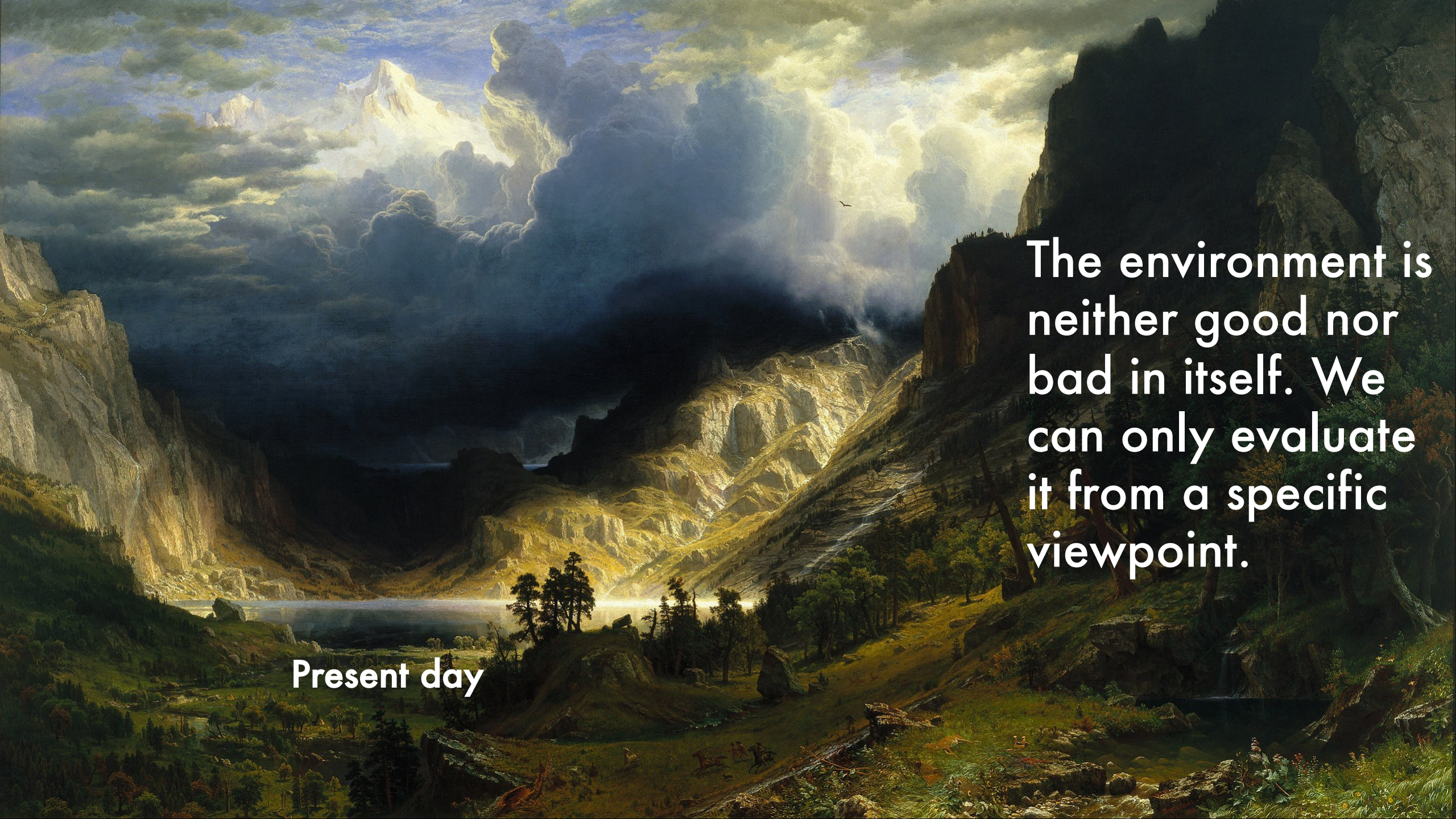
If you set out climbing
this morning without the
proper gear, you might
find yourself in trouble.

Present day



If there has been a long
season of drought, and
you're a farmer, you
might welcome the rain.

Present day



The environment is
neither good nor
bad in itself. We
can only evaluate
it from a specific
viewpoint.

Present day



Present day

In a physical landscape, we can gain altitude for a fresh perspective on the world around us. Multiple vantage points yield more information.



Future

Future

Future

Present day

Here, as strategists, we displace ourselves in time. We manufacture challenging yet plausible visions of the future to gain the benefit of hindsight.

Gradually, as you answer question 10 and develop a set of future islands, you will have a sense of how the environment around you might change beyond current expectations.

We can now use these future islands as scenarios: plausible, relevant visions of the future context, contrasting to one another and challenging to current assumptions.

For each scenario, we can explore questions 11-16, always relating our future explorations back to our situation in the here-and-now.

In each scenario...

11. What should we stop?

12. What should we start?

13. What should we continue?

In each scenario...

14. Who should we partner with?

15. Who might we need to become?

These questions invite us to reconsider our roles and relationships in the changed environment of each future island, after the sea of uncertainty has come ashore.

If we've done our job well, reckoning with these questions in each future should also give us a better sense of our options in the present.

We can also consider what we would do today in preparation, mitigation, or avoidance - if such a future were definitely ahead of us.

We should be able to revisit questions 2-4 with fresh insights and a new sense of our capability to address the uncertain environment effectively.

Because these scenarios are not predictions of what is likely to happen, nor expressions of what we wish to happen, we have a lot of freedom to think about what we will do amid the uncertainty of the present.

The future is as yet unwritten, and we have visited these changed islands only to better understand the uncertainties which surround us in the present day – not to foreclose possibilities.

Our enhanced understanding can be the basis for wise and judicious action.

But the most important question has been saved until last.

16. How will this moment be remembered?

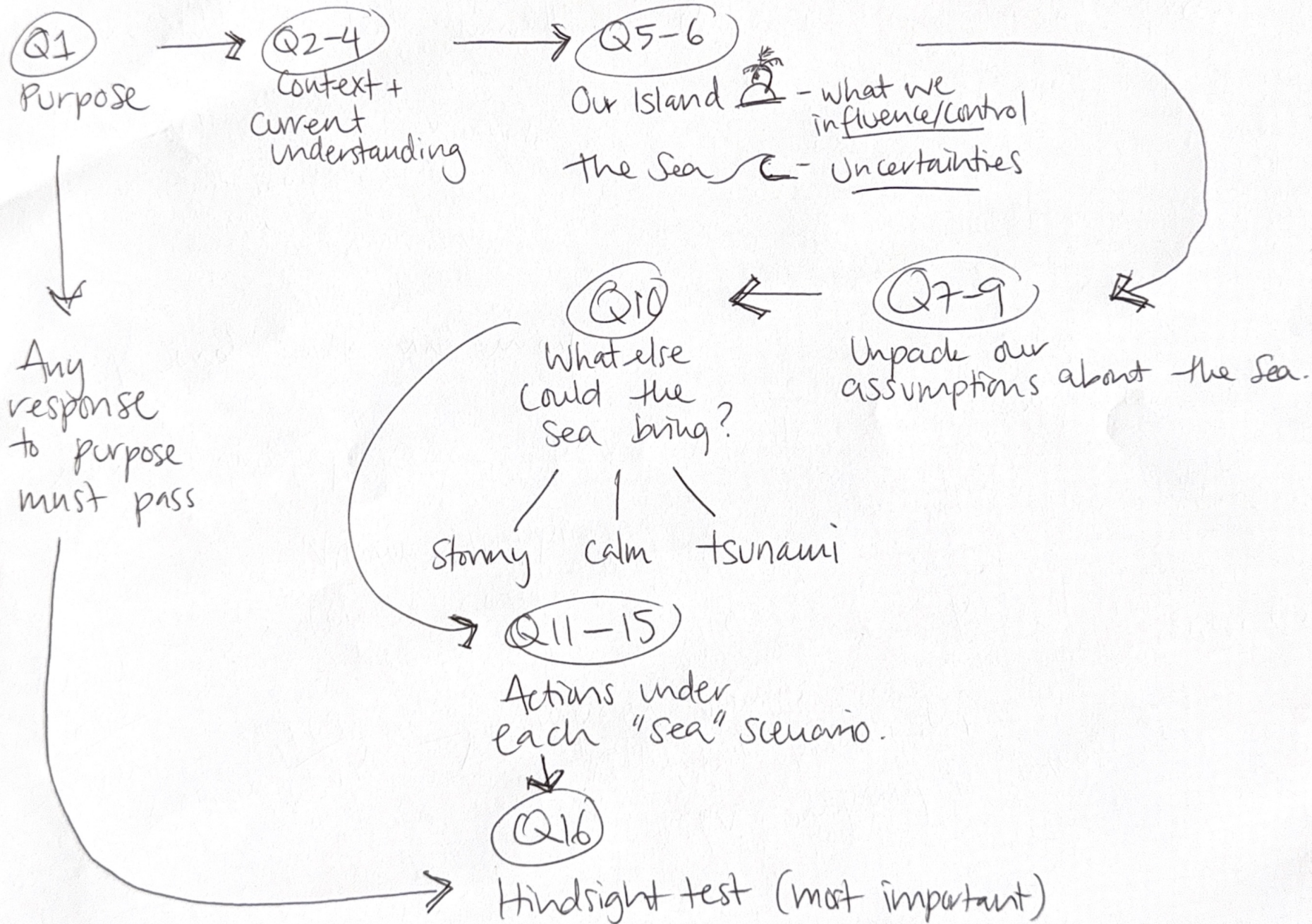
If you only have time for one question, this is the one to ask.

It forces you to confront the situation you face today, but also the future which you imagine will one day look back on your decisions and judge you in hindsight.

Thinking about how this question would be answered in each scenario provides you with multiple points of hindsight on the present, and the chance to consider alternative framings & evaluations of the concerns you face today.

However you use this work, remember to approach it in a spirit of exploration.

For example: Jeanette Lambert, an early reader, sketched a flowchart-like diagram to help visualise the process, adding new metaphors.



Courtesy of
Jeanette Lambert;
reproduced with
permission

The Galway Questions are intended for you to play and experiment with, finding your own way to apply and adapt them.

They create an opportunity to see the world anew, questioning how you look at it, as much as what you are seeing.

Further reading

This approach sits within the tradition of Oxford-style scenarios: see Rafael Ramírez and Angela Wilkinson, *Strategic Reframing: The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Questions 2-4 derive from Geoffrey Vickers, *The Art of Judgment* (Chapman and Hall, 1965). See the discussion in Ramírez and Wilkinson, pp. 97-98.

The “island and sea” diagram is adapted from Rafael Ramírez, Steve Churchhouse, Alejandra Palermo, and Jonas Hoffmann, “Using scenario planning to reshape strategy”, *MIT Sloan Management Review* (2017).

Questions 7-9 build on Kees van der Heijden’s ‘clairvoyant questions’ in *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Wiley, 2005).

On laying aside assumptions, see George Burt and Anup Karath Nair’s “Rigidities of information in scenario planning: strategic foresight through ‘unlearning’”, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 153 (2020): 119927.

Question 15 builds on Trudi Lang’s work on strategy and identity; see her “Being and becoming: reconciling the temporal mismatch between organizational strategy and identity by providing identity with a future”, *Strategic Management Review* 6.3 (2025): 247-272.

Readers inclined to use AI with this process may benefit from the insights in Ramírez and Lang’s “A Faster Way to Build Future Scenarios”, *MIT Sloan Management Review* (2025), which argues for “AI-in-the-loop”, used as a thinking partner, rather than “human-in-the-loop”, supervising AI processes.

For a similar tool adapting the Oxford approach, see the Open University’s “Islands in the Sky” project: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/money-business/hybrid-working-planning-the-future/content-section-5.3>

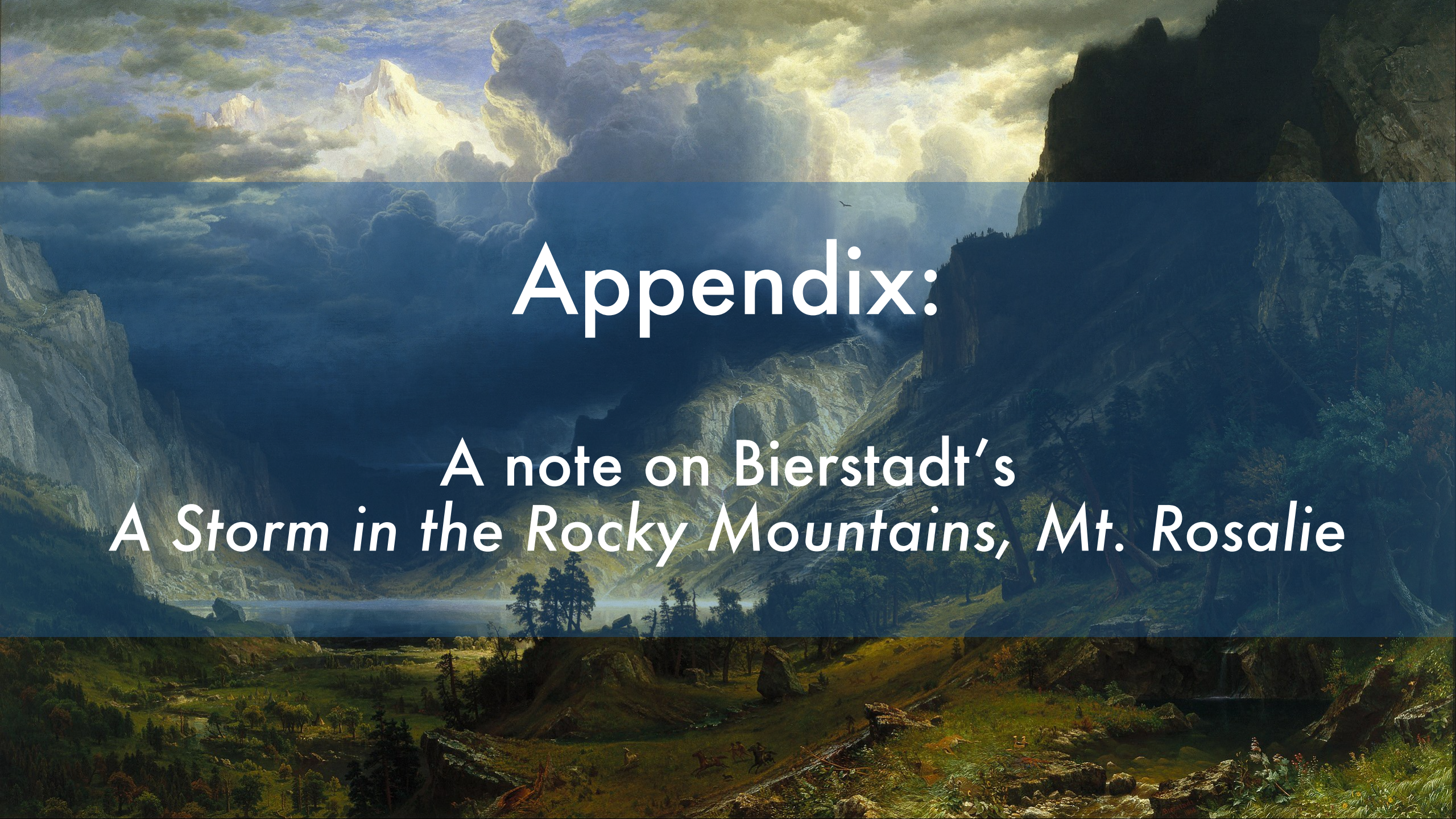
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Appendix:

A note on Bierstadt's
A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie

Our foresight work is like Albert Bierstadt's painting in a number of important ways.

While Bierstadt depicted a real landscape, he was doing so subjectively – making aesthetic choices as he painted and creating dramatic effect.

He was also not a neutral observer. Bierstadt visited this landscape on a US government expedition to survey the territories of the American West. His painting was subsequently exhibited for a ticket-buying public. And Mount Rosalie was named by Bierstadt himself – after the wife of his friend and expedition companion, Fritz Ludlow. Rosalie Ludlow would subsequently divorce her husband and marry Bierstadt.

Bierstadt's painting both encouraged the burgeoning movement to protect American landscapes through the formation of national parks and highlighted the opportunities to exploit and profit from those landscapes' resources.

Yet this land was not simply a wilderness, "available for the taking." Native American figures appear in the painting, but they are miniscule against the romantic setting. Their histories, perspectives, and rights go unaddressed.

Our work here, too, does not pretend to objectivity but forces us to reckon with our partial points of view. It is an art as much as a science. We must represent our situation, and the futures we construct, with integrity, humility, curiosity, respect, and close attention to our own position and values.

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