Welcome to a few thoughts about the future. We believe the human experience will change more over the next few generations than at any time since perhaps the development of agricultural society around 10,000 years ago. Current research in arenas from neuroscience—Moran Cerf’s field—artificial intelligence and human computer interfaces to energy, agriculture and space exploration, supports our assertion.

We don’t pretend to predict the future in detail, but we can envision the contours. Trends and forces observable today suggest various directions. We tend to overemphasize current paradigms and underappreciate weak signals of change—until some of them intensify. How can we best prepare for eventualities, whether expected, hypothesized or blindsiding? With attention and consideration, we can dissolve some of the opacity of what might come.

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Technologies proven today will likely improve. If we denude technologies from the applications and contexts for which they were initially developed, we can observe their essential capabilities. We can then hypothesize the implications of these capabilities for business, society and life.

But foresight is not simply about discerning what might happen from the perspective of some sort of external, aloof observer or impotent victim. We humans are active in presents unfolding toward futures that never quite arrive. We are both subjects and objects in creation.

The entrance of the National Archives in Washington, DC, presents Shakespeare’s familiar quote, “what’s past is prologue,” engraved in stone. The prosaic interpretation is that the past creates the context for the present and future.

This is certainly true, but Shakespeare’s intent was different. In The Tempest, Antonio encourages Sebastian to murder his sleeping father, and to thus become king. Antonio argues that once they have taken this step, the past becomes merely prologue to a dramatically new world, a world they will create by their bold (heinous) act.

The past is both context and question: What will we make of that which we have received? We can proceed unawares, as many do, or we can define futures to which we aspire and act to manifest them.
We can live for the moment, as many would have us do, but with aspirations, we are more likely to contribute to futures in which we hope to live. Aspirations, thus engaged, transform both our presents and futures.

For the present volume, we proceed from a wide frame within which we believe all human systems—social, political, economic, cultural and faith—will be challenged to adapt, a frame of emerging abundance and hyper-transparency. We then explore a dynamic that will define the path for all industries (and we do mean “all”) over the coming generations: production and provision of value moving ever closer to the moment of demand. What we refer to as proximity. The following chapter digresses toward one implication of this trend, the king customer paradox, wherein the more we as customers are empowered and served through technology, the more we lose control. Already well advanced, these trends will intensify and proliferate.

Later this century, advances in technologies such as virtual reality, invisible interfaces, intelligence-to-intelligence (i2i) communications and other technologies suggest we will egress into what will become suffered and enjoyed as a post-virtual world. Contexts and experiences generated or enhanced by technology, today considered virtual, will become so comprehensively experienced as to be understood via more diverse, nuanced definitions of reality.

More of our lives will be constructed and experienced within these new environments of nearly unlimited potential variety. Identity, desire, privacy, authenticity, art, interpretation and even meaning will thus evolve this century. We’ll yet again, though more palpably than in the past, encounter the question, what might remain unique to being human? As artificial intelligence expands and diversifies, as our technological offspring attain greater awareness and efficacy, what might remain uniquely ours?

As we argue in the cheerfully titled essay NOTHING, it is difficult to discern any manifest aspect of being a human (setting aside the as-yet-unprovable notion of an immortal soul) that will be beyond the reach of technology. Though consider that these capabilities will likely become ever more integrated with our own physical and mental processes. Rather than some sort of us-versus-them robot apocalypse, both our enemies and allies will be us. Transformed, but us nonetheless.

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We must overcome the notion that technology is somehow beyond nature. Anything we create is by definition an expression of the evolutionary, adaptive processes of nature. We are not so special, except of course to ourselves, and for our knock-on impacts on life on Earth. We suspect that no third-party being would begrudge us our preoccupation with our own survival. They might, though, wonder at many of the actions we take, apparently against our species’ higher interests.

We control little in the world. Some would say nothing. As we argue in our concluding essay, one of the few factors over which we appear to have control is our attention. As a wider, more diverse range of agents, stimuli and experiences vie for our limited share of mind, to what we attend becomes an increasingly essential, even ethical, question.
The poems in this volume are meant to diversify from our prose and provide another lens. Don’t seek direct relevance from the surrounding essays, but perhaps relevance at another level of abstraction. It’s sometimes easier to see faint stars by looking slightly beside.

The cardinal question of technology is that which we’ve faced since our ancestors first threw a stone or lit a fire. Will we be beneficiaries or victims of our own will and curiosity? This question will attain far greater presence and poignancy this century. As authors, researchers and teachers, we hope that by exercising visions of plausible futures, both here and in our wider efforts, we make some small contribution to positive answers.