Jenny Odell, *Haupstrom*

Anthropocene Blues

TOM LITSTER

Individual stories of totality were still in place even though the grand project was no longer feasible.

Dear child of fortune, born today
into the middle of things,
break a leg. Don't look for gods
descending in a basket,
or prompters in the wings.
Declaim one memorable soliloquy.
Turn a spotlight. Or pick up
pelting litter from the stage.
There is no ending, happy
or otherwise. Just play your part.

—Alice Major, *Welcome to the Anthropocene*

One

IMAGINATION BALKS

> *It is an issue of scale, then, and the difficulties involved in considering the human on the level of geologic agency are in part due to what the literary scholar Lawrence Buell has called a "crisis of the imagination."*
>
> — Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Imagining Geological Agency: Storytelling in the Anthropocene*

WE ARE IN THE DRIVER SEAT NOW, we humans: the biological agents who became geological agents. The unnatural power of our technology and societies has unexpectedly made us natural again, a collective geophysical force akin to a dinosaur-decimating asteroid. We are the ones who have barely arrived in a deep history covering great spans of time and have seized the planet with sheer numbers and our capacities for terraforming whatever land is around us. Enduring effects of our technologies and short-sighted actions changed the seas and the atmosphere. This is a power entirely new under the sun. We came up with a name for it: the Anthropocene, the Age of the Human.

In the long ago of childhood, no one recognized themselves as having any part in a geological agency. The surprise and shock of another of our unnatural powers held our attention: an explosion in a New Mexico desert on July 16, 1945, that was brighter than the sun and may have reflected faintly on the moon as it began the Atomic Age. It began a new story of us. We were suddenly the species theoretically capable of removing itself from Earth.

I didn't recognize geological agency during my youthful experiments with modern cultural bohemianism, not even on July 20, 1969, when two men were seen on television walking around on Earth's moon. They were the only aliens we had actually seen. "Within the hour, the moon is due to have visitors from another planet," Walter Cronkite reported as he gave us another new story: "The Lunar Age has begun."

There were hints and clues about an unfolding ecological disaster as I shaped a career from the odd encounters and fugitive possibilities of living in Economy as *homo economicus*. But it was hard to think about actions that have a hundred-year, or a thousand-year scale to them. It was even harder to rethink human history as a disaster story that began 10,000 years ago when we became keen on farming, or when the chimneys of Europe belched coal smoke, or when that first steam engine pumped water out of a coal mine.

We still struggled to imagine the fullness of our power even as the new concept of an Anthropocene Era traveled beyond scientific journals and took flight in popular culture with ethical and existential meanings. In the language of cultural anthropologists, if we had good stories for this:

> *They would tell us we are dealing with significant and decisive acts of importance for the world, acts once thought to be of gods or superhuman beings but are now acts entirely of our own. Our response is an essential part of the story. When these acts may have taken place is also important.*
>
> *The narrative would come from a common human community. It would bear the marks of culture and persist over generations as a part of our traditions.*
>
> *The community would prize the story because it suggests or answers something distinctive and important in both human and ecological existence, particularly ecological existence.*
>
> *The relation in which the story stands to the existence of an ecological community would become an inseparable part of the human community's life and an actual carrier of its power.*

For thousands of years humans didn't split the world into a law-abiding, physical universe, on the one hand, and a messy subjective experience on the other. Nature and self, reality and fantasy were fluid and unpredictable except when rituals, taboos or stories told with priestly authority were invoked to stabilize aspects of life fraught with emotional stress, and so needed to be placed into the sacred and the profane. Or when the powerfulness inherent in an extraordinary phenomenon was sensed as a living force, and so needed to be personified. Rituals re-enacted powerful experiences and cosmic events, and myths shared them.

Through storytelling the old ones learned to transport themselves away from the here and now to an imagined performance in a story world. They participated in performances that were not only dramatic representations of real aspects of the world, they told how the world came to be. Experiences of enigma and power, and dangerous others like lions, tigers and bears, were transformed and accepted into the community. Flutes were made from a bear's bones. On a cave wall someone drew the head of a bull on the legs of woman. They wanted to leave a trace of themselves, so they put a hand on a cave wall and blew pigment around it to sign their story. Art and music and telling stories became essential to what *human* does.

Modernity came along, a hammer looking for nails, and remade *human* without that world of experience with its traces and memories of non-human. That was dispersed and lost. The old ones became ghosts who were to no longer walk or appear among us, and were not to be regarded with wonder and astonishment. Their stories became the archaic that was longer audible to us. Modernity imposed a linear march of historical events on what had been fluid. It devalued the old stories and art, and most of priestly authority. Prometheus was unbound and bound for an endless pursuit of freedom, and for frontiers where you could find whatever you wanted if only you had the wherewithal.

We declared this to be progress, similar to progress in science, medicine, technology, industrial production and political order. All of *before* was to be understood as social and cultural contexts, its significance left to the whims of history. We assured ourselves that should we ever need to we could go back and enter into those caves, camps and villages with the fierceness of modernity and they would flee. If necessary, we could burn it all behind us in an

incomprehensible act of admiration and violence against those who are not us, and to guard against any reawakened memories within us.

We could choose to mourn their absence now, if that's what we wanted to do, through our way of living (this is not a sentimental longing for a "primitive and natural state"). It might prove difficult to find our way out of such a mourning.

MOST OF OUR ANTHROPOCENE STORIES are impoverished. We settle for reports of the consequences our geological agency in newspapers and magazines — retreating sea ice, accelerating species extinction, bleached coral reefs, deranged weather. They are backed up with data, graphs and satellite photographs. I'm surrounded by stories of catastrophe, a word from a root that means a sudden overturning, and disaster, which originally meant "ill-starred" or "under a bad star." Think of Shakespeare's *Hamle*t, disasters in the sun and moist stars. We are in a climate crisis, a medical term for the crossroads a patient reaches, at which point they will recover or die. We are at a tipping point, I'm told. What does that even look like? "We have to think the unthinkable," we say to each other.

It's a weird daily game of truth and consequences meant to alarm us and shame us, and to goad us into personal and collective action. We summarize it in documentaries and present it to ourselves as immersive interactive experiences of virtual reality. We sit in darkened theaters and watch the CGI animation of climate disaster movies shown in cinematic time, which is not the same as Earth time, and the scripts are usually more about the fates and redemptions of the human protagonists than Earth.

There is a new moral scale of the terrible for us to imagine: millions of humans will die, most will humans die, or all humans die along with much of Earth's biological life. Which is worse? We began this kind of imagining after that explosion in New Mexico quickly made its way to Hiroshima (cockroaches and rats will survive, we joked). We face it again as confusion sets in at the intersection of day-to-day experience and the terrifying scale of global warming and a deranged climate. Our sense of history as *human* history as the continuity between past and future has been disrupted. Nothing about me or you is

individually meaningful at a geological scale, and yet every single thing we do might turn out centuries from now to have been incredibly important. We hope our children will grow up to be neither destroyers nor destroyed.

For the most part, our stories are told from the perspective of a species with an ontological privilege we assumed for ourselves centuries ago: the privilege of being a destroyer, utilizer or caretaker of the natural world as we see fit. The stories fall short of an ecological acceptance of being an interdependent species coexisting among species.

We humans have always had trouble with radical awareness — from the pre-Copernican days, when we hailed ourselves as the center of the universe, to the campaign against Darwin for demonstrating our evolutionary consanguinity. How do we scale ourselves up to what the Anthropocene means? How do we blend chronologies we once thought were immiscible? Radically rethinking human history as Earth history is uncanny and our imagination balks. Perhaps one hope is that our difficulty has become a concern of the humanities and the arts, of poetry and song, and storms are again turning into allegories. This may help us get closer to a full understanding.

IN MY EXPERIENCE the world, being large and inscrutable, moves off in a certain direction and cannot be recalled to its previous state. I think any new account of us will be more difficult than it might seem.

Let's assume for a moment that we do create a story of ourselves beyond the hierarchies of disaster and the literalism of data and facts, which are not metaphors for imagining the future. What do we tell the intimate time of the future? Shall we say we didn't mean for any of this to happen, it was just a consequence of our being here in the first place? We might concede that we knew what was happening and what needed to be done, but only the future humans will know if we did it.

Will the daughters of our granddaughters and their daughters see that we put a spike through notions of human exceptionalism, and our preoccupation with human tragedies and the triumphs and struggles of our own psyches, and that we accepted interdependence as *human* at a species scale? Will they see that we

invited a convocation of non-human specters into our community, perhaps as spiritual guides like in the old myths, to aid us in imagining an ecocommunism of humans and nonhumans alike.

Like the old ones, we may want to leave traces of ourselves beyond the geology and ecology of disaster. We may want to blow pigment around our hand and sign that story.