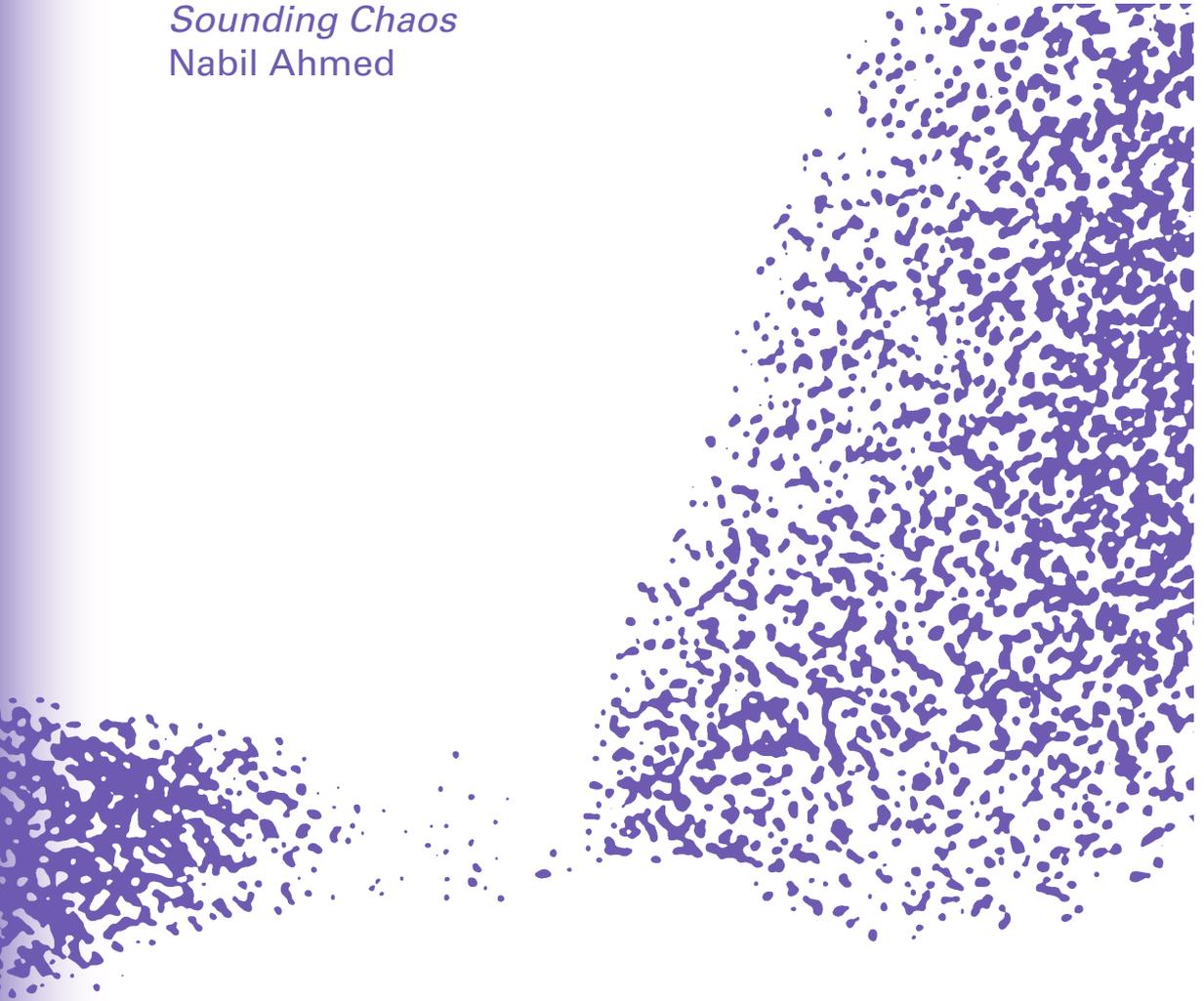


*Sounding Chaos*  
Nabil Ahmed



1

Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008.

2

Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997, p.4.

### Chaos

- I listen for the din and clamour of chaos, its sonorous multiplicity. I want to sound the depths of the dynamic forces of the earth. Under the rocks flows a liquid sea of magma. Chaos is not absolute disorder but rather the unpredictable, whirling vibration of nonhuman forces that bind the universe. But as life and nonlife forms from this buzzing, cosmic carcass, chaos remains a creative force for futures yet to come. It is in this emergent virtual that organisms act creatively in a hostile, wondrous world. I invite you to listen to the multiple agents of chaos, in the catastrophes of wind, the sea and the earth. As I move, I cross lines of difference, I am at war with fixity, proceeding rather by layers, cuts and sudden sweeps, like a 'wild track', non-synchronous, recorded without pictures.
- 1.

- In *Genesis*, Michel Serres offers the multiple as 'a new object for philosophy'. Like the hydrography of the Ganges delta that continuously bifurcates, the multiple rejects bringing the world under the sway of the metaphysics of the unitary. The multiple is chaos, or noise. Serres asks, 'can I possibly speak of multiplicity itself without ever availing myself of the *concept*?' This multiple is different from unitary concepts and binary structures. In this immersive background swell, the epistemic gap between not knowing whether the world is a unitary system or bathed in multiplicity draws knowledge to its outside. Reason is islands of negentropy in a chaotic sea. To think without the concept is 'a multiplicity of thought' despite a
- 2.



- world in thrall to reason. Reason's triumph, Serres tells us, the birth of order out of chaos, is a victor's version of history as violence that in its purification purges 'the confused, the profane, the unclean, the victim, accordingly, excluding, in any event, for the greater glory and power of its new priests' technoscience and the state, the patriarchal death-cult. As with the foundation of Rome, it is always a capturing act of the violence of episteme over psyche. Said Mephistopheles to the student:
- 3.

There's so much poison hidden in what  
you learn.

And it's barely distinguishable from the  
antidote.

The best thing here's to make a single  
choice.

Then simply swear by your master's voice.

On the whole, to words stick fast!

Through the safest gate you'll pass

To the temple of certainty.

4. — Goethe, *Faust*

So the dovetail conceals the devil, in the phase transition of reducing entropy from the hot sun to glacial earth. But if not the concept, the dragging into dualism's pit, of moving through exclusion and of removing the multiple possibilities for the 'one', then what fortuitous meal to make out of the multiple for the errant philosopher? Fortunately chaos is not only to be found somewhere far out. Chaos is bodily (earthly) experiences interring signs of



language for sensation. To approach writing about chaos or noise is to move through multiplications, transformations and translations of the body, voice, speech but also the earth's dynamic forces. Foregoing the tyranny of language as reason, Serres favours the aesthetics of song:

One writes initially through a wave of music, a groundswell that comes from the background noise, from the whole body, maybe, and maybe from the depths of the world or through the front door, or from our latest loves, carrying its complicated rhythm, its simple beat, its melodic line, a swift, wafting, a broken fall.

5.

It is this sensation that speeds or slows down my fingers in the very act of writing. I write in spite of myself. Poverty of language distrusts the paradox of writing. A Serrean invention of song liberates the writer from the detritus of inspiration. While we can close our eyes, we cannot stop hearing the noise swirling around us. Like the sea, noise is there to remind us of a constant, if minute, proximity to chaos, of a sinking back into the void. The poet's viscous alchemy, it resides between call and response, questioning and answer. Which is noise, the sea or the snails, or the sea moving through the snails? The aggregate, the multiple, noise can be described but not defined. As the ground swells up, it collapses a figure-ground relationship. It is the sea in which order seems fleeting. No longer the message that is in the bottle, it is the milieu, ruckus of the sea in motion. Earth's duplicitous energy is the veritable space of transmission, however faint,

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Michel Serres, *The Parasite*,  
trans. Lawrence R. Schehr,  
University of Minnesota  
Press, Minneapolis, 2007.

7

Joseph Campbell, *The Masks  
of God: Primitive Mythology*,  
vol. 1, Arkana, New York,  
1992, p.6.

- or a rising, roaring din. For Serres, noise is this parasite, the third party, present in any communication between the sender and the receiver. Noise poisons the poison. What is being excluded never leaves the stage but transforms the state of play through its presence. That interference, is rather, a productive force. The more we claim to know, the wider is that circle's circumference, pushing out to the unknown, and the further we are from its so-called centre.
- 6.

- Mythography, literature, music and forms of storytelling are urgently needed in times of disaster, not of an event to come, whirling about, vertiginous. The stories I tell are in *recto verso*, between the intersecting hieroglyphs of myth and geohistory. One passes over the other in silence, with sound and fury. The account of our species was not only intent on chronicling the progress of man as the 'tool maker', but also on narrating the visions of its seers, to incarnate the supernatural into earthly communities. To seek this natural history of the gods that went through as many mutations as the mineral, vegetal and animal, we must take a journey back through the abyss of time, sounding deeper into that depth, below the horizon of humanity, the 'ritual dance among the birds, the fish, the apes and the bees'. To know, we must imagine. To invent is to imagine, to contrive, to unveil and to lie. So I begin.
- 7.

Hesiod, *Works and Days, Theogony, and the Shield of Heracles*, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 2006, p.50.

Invocation

*The whole earth seethed, and sky and sea: and the long waves raged along the beaches round and about, at the rush of the deathless gods: and there arose an endless shaking.*

8. — Hesiod, *Theogony*

The convoy of our cars rose up above the upward winding road, Bay of Bengal floating over the horizon. It had come time to listen to the sea. The symphonic fury of the wind whips up the sea. The wind and the sea multiply the multiple. The resemblance between the airwaves and oceanic waves re-join, an occult pact. A dense column of whirling wind speeds towards land under sheets of rain. Moving with magisterial force, its motive remains obscure. The unknown points of the cyclone – their continual variation captured in a single, striated image – are calculated in the calm violence of space. Far below, escaping the grid, a seething, abyssal ocean doubles the reciprocal unholy pact. The icy, deep water summoned from phantom depths, spell-bound, foaming, forming a great conjunction with the warm air. A primal scene, all lights flattened out, remaining murderous wind and sea, roar of the bay, black on black. From the wailing wall of winds, images of death flashed, drowned corpses thrown back, strung on dead branches over a morphing delta. Just before the wall of water reaches shoreline is the edge of disaster. It is a



phase transition into the moment of death, slowed down. The shoreline tender, the wind and sea fierce. In that brief moment stretching across an endless, exposed shoreline in the midnight hour looms the unthinkable violence. This interval desires madness. A vortex of summons, a vortex summons. The moment wrenched the bodies, the night, turning the land into the crushing unfathomable. The sea, our mother (*la Mer, c'est la mere* writes Serres in 'Michelet: The Soup'), which had until then welcomed the ashes of so many burnt bodies of its devotees carried by *The Ichamati*, set forth to devour her children. The vipers and toads came out of their cracks in November. Unknowingly, I have written a noisy history of storms out of which the divine and the demonic appeared from nowhere.

The stars are blotted out,  
Clouds are covering clouds,  
It is darkness, vibrant, sonant.  
In the roaring whirling wind  
Are the souls of a million lunatics –  
But loosed from the prison house –  
Wrenching trees by the roots,  
Sweeping all from the path.  
The sea has joined the fray,  
And swirls up mountain-waves,  
To reach the pitchy sky.

Scattering plagues and sorrows,  
Dancing mad with joy,  
Come, Mother, Come!



Vivekananda's devotional poem to the Goddess Kali begins with a natural disaster, the dance of creation and destruction as he calls forth the goddess. Out of the natural comes the supernatural. So at 4:00 am on Mahalaya, the first day of Durga Puja, at the end of the witching hour, West Bengal tunes into All India Radio. Red-eyed, the radio crackles and bursts once again to life with the enchanting, disembodied, recorded voice of the late Birendra Krishna Bhadra reciting from the *Mahisasuramardini* (The Slaying of the Buffalo Demon), theological radio from 1931. They listen dotingly.

In the third episode of *Devi-Mahatmya*, The Dark One first appears in a cosmological battlefield between *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons), to restore cosmic order in heaven and earth. Mahashisura, the buffalo demon-king had waged a war against the gods and driven them from heaven. The gods, unable to defeat the demonic army, called the Goddess Durga, the mother of the universe, from a mass of cosmic light emerging from their mouths. Powerful as 10,000 suns, a being of light, she descended onto earth with a storming across the sky. Early in the battle, Durga faces the demons Chanda and Munda. Angered by their approach, her face turns black as ink; a terrifying emaciated Kali springs from her forehead and slays them both in one radial sweep. After nine days of fierce battle the buffalo demon is slain. Durga's next battle is with Raktabija, who after each attack multiplies from drops of his own blood as they



touch the ground. The surface of the earth is the demon's force multiplier. Like a hall of mirrors, the more he is wounded the more there are duplicates on the battlefield. Durga, unable to counter the demon's magic, issues the dark and terrifying Kali once more, the chthonic deity, goddess of time and change, from the surface of her forehead as a burst of psychic energy. The destroyer emerges, as colours disappear into black, gaunt, wearing a garland of skulls. She laps up the bursts of blood from Raktabija's nested wounds with her enormous tongue as molecules hurry to make contact with gravity. Her immanent mouth, gaping as wide as the horizon of the battlefield, eats the demonic duplicates. Her orality is the source of violence. Born from the mouth of the gods with the power of destructive suns, it is her orality that saves the gods.

Raktabija, blood borne, is contained. An intoxicating Kali dances madly among the slain. Her frenzied dance threatens to destroy the world. A prodigious *feminine inferno* dances in destruction's dance. She is out of control, threatening the world she set out to protect. She pauses at the sight of a pale naked body underneath, her left foot on his chest and her right foot on his thigh. In the moment of recognition she becomes bashful and sticks out her tongue. Copulating while playing dead, Shiva's eyes are fixed on hers – steady and eternally until she is aroused, inhabiting every thing. *Prakriti* begins to vibrate and destruction and creation resume their love-war. The battlefield or the cremation ground is the scenography of this

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p.217.

Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Mukherjee, Kolkata, 1998.

cosmic dance, a *choreomania*. The dancer is without music. In the dead of night, the hero's recourse is to confront that frightful appearance. Even though the goddess, the sea, the mother earth, may be abject, and hostile at times, her children have little choice but to return to her for protection. Don't be afraid, sweet one! In her slightly open mouth are glimpses of a dark formlessness that swallowed the night. 'A night without images but buffeted by black sounds', yes, that uterine darkness is sonant. Dance in destruction's dance.

10.

Let us pause for a moment and return to the scene of the battlefield. The demon Raktabija multiplies himself. An agent of chaos defeated by an Indo-Aryan war goddess. And Munda, slain in her emaciated vision, was the name of the tribe that led a sustained indigenous resistance against colonial power – a demon?

In 1873, The Raj had dispatched Herbert Hope Risley to Bengal to make a comprehensive field survey of the tribes and castes of the deep forests and hills. Risley's racist anthropometry attempted to apply the Linnean classification of natural history to bring India into a certain administrative order out of its indigenous multiplicity. Astonishingly, in a passage of his introductory essay, Risley compares the socialities of the tribes and castes, the manner of their formation and their various totem-cosmologies, to geological strata. In other words, over-codification as described in *A Thousand Plateaus* as 'phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization and

11.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p.41.

Hilda Doolittle and Louis L. Martz, *Collected Poems 1912–44*, New Directions, New York, 1986, p.55.

12. finalization'. With an indexical gaze I come across the Asuras, a small non-aryan tribe from present-day Lohardaga district in the state of Jharkand. For obscure reasons these metallurgist tribespeople (*Loha* meaning iron in Sanskrit and Bengali) were made into demons in Vedic mythology. Etymologically, Deva is derived from the Avestan language where *Daeva* means a nefarious demon – a 'being of shining light', equivalents of which are found in Pashto, Baluch, Persian, Kurdish and Urdu. Devas are demonised in Zoroastrianism. This is practically reversed in the Indic languages, particularly in later Vedic texts and Hinduism: the Devas are benevolent gods in conflict with Asuras. Myth and history dovetail.

Seashell noise

Whirl up, sea –  
whirl your pointed pines,  
splash your great pines  
on our rocks,  
hurl your green over us,  
cover us with your pools of fir.

13. — H.D., *Oread*

Nature, mother, the goddess, the sea is not nearly as nurturing, loving and inexhaustible. She is indifferent, yet to her we must return. The familiar tale of shipwreck and survival, the return back from the yawning maw of the maelstrom with a head full of white hair, with the knowledge that only the sea

NPR, 'Key West, Fla., Celebrates The "A-Conch-Alypse"', <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/29/163846141/key-west-fla-celebrates-the-a-conch-alypse> (accessed 29 July 2015).

Alvin Lucier, *Reflections: Interviews, Scores, Writings = Reflexionen: Interviews, Notationen, Texte*. 1. Aufl edition, MusikTexte, Cologne, 1995, p.62.

can impart, is told from the summit of a mountain. For the imagist poet H.D., the sea was like a pine forest. We often compare tsunamis to mountains. Pressing my ear-whorl to the conch I listen to the noise of the concrete sea. The roar of the boundless, nameless sea gathers and is present in the resonant cavity of the seashell. The sound is distant, dull, attenuating. The world around me compresses into a sonic act. *Triplofusus giganteus*, the queen conch *Eustrombus gigas*, *Strombus Lucifer*, so named by Linnaeus, who coupled sea and knowledge. The voices of the dead from the storm resonating, the seashell is a spirit medium. Is it a murmurous or murderous history that I hear?

14. Good morning. I'm Steven Inskeep. Key West, Florida, has seen its share of hurricanes. But as Sandy passed well to the east, residents of the island completed their annual fantasy fest. The theme was A-Conch-Alypse – you know, the apocalypse but with conch shells.

15. The composer Alvin Lucier recalls the story of how he came to the idea of writing the piece *Chambers*. A scene inspired him from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, where men are seen walking on the ocean floor with enormous conch shells filled with air over their heads. In Verne's strange journey, the furtive procession led from the shoreline to the bottom of the sea where lay Nautilus. In the summer of 1968, Lucier was in San Diego, invited by Pauline Oliveros to perform his piece *Whistlers* that harnessed ionospheric sound for radio receiver and



antenna. While driving around the oceanfront not far from Keystone hotel where Walter Evans-Wentz lived, they came across a shop with a sign that read 'seashells', and Lucier purchased an assortment of shells.

Lucier had listened to Tibetan lamas chanting death rites with the *Turbinella pyrum* that found its way to the auditory cortex on the highest plateau on earth. The conch shell is a planetary liberation technology. The players blew their breath into the conch. Elegant in their composure and with stoic faces that seemed always about to burst into laughter, they dispersed, spinning slowly, as they continuously blew into the shells, loosely structured by their pitch, beats, timbre, chords and octaves until the sound of the shells attenuated at the threshold of hearing. In another performance in Steinway Hall in New York, the performers moved outside onto Fifty-seventh Street. Due to the pitch and timbre of the shells' resonant chambers, environmental sounds of the city, trucks, cars, horns, the background noise took on the pitch of the conch shells. Lucier thought, it's just like the percussion section of an orchestra where the bass drum takes on the pitch of the vital chord. Or the vital élan. The seashell has come spiral bound, from casting a memory of the sea to the re-enchancement as the sound of our own blood. The cochlea in our ear, named after the conch. The ear-snail, we are its shell, resonant bodies. The shell is a telephone reaching the scale of the earth.

William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Complete Works*,  
Bloomsbury, London, 1998,  
p.377.

### Earthbound

Four elephants hold up the earth. They are poised on top of a turtle, which stands on the head of a cobra. When any of the creatures move, the earth shakes. A giant catfish sleeps under the sea. The island of Japan rests on its back. A demigod holds a heavy rock over his head to keep the behemoth steady. Once in a while he is distracted and the earth tumbles. Earth lay poised over boundless seas, a fateful land on an endless ocean. For thousands of years, the fate of the earth rested on the whims of gods and animals. Why did the knowing apes turn to mythology to explain earthquakes as a profound mystery governing their lives? What is the natural history of mythography? Aristotle's meteorology made no difference between earth and sky. Powerful winds were trapped in underground caverns, earthquakes resulted from their struggle to escape. Trouble came from below, from an internally stressed earth, as noted by Shakespeare in *Henry IV*: 'diseased nature oftentimes breaks forth in strange eruptions; of the teeming earth', as violent winds seek release from the earth's womb, announcing the birth of rebels.

17.

Earth moves through violent upheavals resulting from the meetings of the boundaries of tectonic plates. This process of violent transformations is an effect of nonhuman forces that are eruptive, rapturous and contingent. Yet the time-scale in which some of these events occur is so long, compared to human history, that we experience life on earth as relatively stable. However, anyone who

Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound  
Earth Signal: Energies and  
Earth Magnitude in the Arts*,  
University of California,  
Berkeley, 2013, p.138.

Arthur Conan Doyle, 'When  
the World Screamed',  
[http://gutenberg.net.au/  
ebooks01/0100031.txt](http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100031.txt)  
(accessed 10 July 2015).

has experienced an earthquake knows how, in a matter of seconds, a feeling of terror arises; as the ground is shaken up our bodies are transformed into delirious seismographs. Whether audible or inaudible, earthquakes leave their acoustic imprint. Whether heard or felt, the sound waves of the earth travel through rocks. As Douglas Kahn has observed, Ernst Von Rebeur-Paschwitz's detection of an earthquake in Tokyo thousands of miles away from his laboratory in Potsdam in 1889 was a 'whole earth' reporting long before earth photography.

18.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger, the egotist scientist impersonated by Deleuze and Guattari in 'The geology of morals: Who does the earth think it is?' – the third plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus* – compared the earth to a mollusc, with a hard outer shell and a soft, fleshy interior. Challenger, the rational man of science, is not far from coming up with an explanation of earth other than planetary myths. However, Challenger is not content with metaphor; he intends to demonstrate that earth is an organism that, up until then, has been totally unaware of human existence on its outer shell. In the lecture Deleuze and Guattari have him deliver, like an ear worm, Challenger drills into the centre of the earth with a pole eight miles long at the press of a button in order to prove his point. The earth responds with a horrible yell: 'For a full minute it lasted, a thousand sirens in one, paralyzing all the great multitude with its fierce insistence ... no sound in history has ever equaled the cry of the injured earth.'

19.

Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2011.

Kahn, 2013, p.164.

The earth, it seemed, made itself heard in this moment of violence to the audience present; indeed, humans and animals listened to the cry. While the earth spewed out a localised tarlike noxious substance in response, I imagine the sound travelled far and wide. How did those who were far away hear the sound of the injured earth? The earth's chthonic scream was planetary. Challenger's boring into the earth was tantamount to sounding a collective ecocide. Hillel Schwartz reminds us that trauma is acoustic. It's strange, he tells us, how we turn again to noise to 'warn of impending crisis', dissonance and onomatopoeia, filling the air with our clamour. We press our poisoned ears to the ground for the long sound of the long emergency, the rabble of rubble.

Before human history, what made the loudest sound on earth and what fed its destructive power in earth's contingent history? The Big Bang? As geologists note, written history only goes back a mere 5,000 years. *Ex libro lapidum historia mundi* – earth's history is written in its rocks. The abyssal time that stretched before folds between erosion and accumulation. When the sonic terror of the Krakatoa eruption in 1883, the largest explosion heard in recorded history, spread across the Indonesian archipelago as far as Diego Garcia, its sound was understood as the distant thunder of cannons. We can go back further to a strangely familiar time and place to imagine listening to the earth scream again, to a final tale of catastrophe, a cosmic morality play where all its actors are indifferent, if you would like.

Carl Zimmer and Walter Alvarez, *T. Rex and the Crater of Doom*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008. See also Mike Davis, *Dead Cities: And Other Tales*, The New Press, New York, 2002.

Ibid.

- 65 million years ago, a geo-cosmic terror made its black visitation at the Cretaceous-Paleogene (K-Pg) boundary. Making contact with the loudest possible sonic boom in just one second, maybe, the comet, which I shall call Kali's comet, an indifferent extra-terrestrial abject rock from the darkest abyss, brought a version of global catastrophe and mass extinction of the dinosaurs. The father and son team of scientists Luis and Walter Alvarez painstakingly reconstructed the impact event following the traces of iridium, one of the rarest metals on earth's crust that is found in abundance on meteorites. With ground zero in the Chicxulub, Yucatan Peninsula in present-day Mexico, the comet's impact produced two simultaneous shock waves, one boring into the mantle, the other pushed backward, vaporising space rock, generating a colossal firestorm and ejecta into the atmosphere that turned into an infernal heat engine. The deadly heat triggered continental forest fires that raged across the planet, blackening the skies, sucking off oxygen. With the impact area near the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico, a giant tsunami struck with ferocious power. When the winds receded, the fallout plunged earth into an endless womb of darkness for months. As the sun returned to shine on a blighted earth, the atmospheric imbalances led to unbearable temperatures and acid rain. Earth poison. Half the plants and animals perished, never to return again.
- Alvarez compared the spreading violence to the coming of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.
- 22.
  - 23.

Nic Marriner, et al., 'Geoscience meets the four horsemen? Tracking the rise of neocatastrophism', *Global and Planetary Change* 74 (2010), pp.43–8.

Martin J. Rudwick, *Bursting the limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, p.194.

24. The sound and the fury of the K-Pg impact sent earth into a deep, violent convulsion. The abyss of time that reaches back into earth's history was punctured by a cosmic horror and its black visitation, an unknown void far out in space. In earth's history book of rocks, stratigraphic boundaries mirror its geological record of catastrophes. The neo-catastrophism of the K-Pg extinction event refutes the comforting thought of earth's history as only uniformitarian, processual and gradual. Alien death rock and its traumatic cut allow us to imagine the earth as radically different.

25. Mineralised remains or traces of organisms from the distant past, fossils were at the same time similar to and different from present life. Similar but not the same, or unknown, species were recorded that indicated the past as wholly different from the present. The extant corpses, whether from land or sea, mixed biology and geology, living and non-living existence as potential markers of geohistory in relation to the present world. As a precursor to stratigraphy, paleontologists and geologists could begin to date rocks across geological time by classifying and ordering fossils amongst the rock strata. For eighteenth-century scientists, the attempt to reconstruct earth's history was problematised by a set of missing evidence among fossils: human remains. Had the humans been present in history from the start, and if not, when did they enter the cosmic drama?

From the point of view of Western science the idea of humans' late entrance pitched theological



imagination against mounting empirical evidence. If humans had entered only in the recent past, then nonhumans dominated earth's deep history. Children of God were not the prime movers of earth's history. Rudwick writes of three different types of evidence with the explanatory power to place the origins of human history in relation to a time-scale of natural history: texts, bones and artefacts. Records of human history and ancient civilisations made from artefacts recovered by archaeological digs were inconclusive, coming up far short of the evidentiary force of fossils. Bones, on the other hand, remained negative evidence. Given the extinction risk from anthropogenic ecological crisis, the very presence of a human fossil record might be a marker of the extinction of other species, a negative archaeology of violence.

From the sky to the ground transversal, from the wind and the noisy sea, the seashell and the hollow of our bodies, we dance destruction's dance. Like the old salt who lives to tell tales of shipwreck that hide the possibility of survival, here I have tried to sketch out a few sensations of that aggregate, the multiple, the planetary noise from within and without, the universe unbound. What can we do but listen in that feeling of darkness?

#### Epilogue

During the age of the Fifth Sun, after storms, fire, floods and jaguars had devoured the earth, the gods of the Aztecs proclaimed a new human race. They sent Quetzalcoatl, the wind god, in search of

Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, trans. Grace Lobanov, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1969, p.38.

human bones to Mictlan, the underworld. There in the dredging depths he confronted Mictlantecuhtli, the god of the dead, keeper of the bones, who could eat entire stars. But before the lord of the underworld would part with the bones of the last human, he asked of Quetzalcoatl an impossible task:

‘I have come for the precious bones  
which you keep here,

I have come to take them’.

And Mictlantecuhtli said to him:

‘What would you do with them,  
Quetzalcoatl?’

And Quetzalcoatl answered him:

‘The gods are concerned  
that someone shall live on the earth’.

And Mictlantecuhtli replied:

‘Very well. Sound my conch shell  
and go four times around my domain’.

But the conch shell had no holes;

Therefore Quetzalcoatl called the worms;  
they made holes in it and

then the bees and hornets went inside  
and made it sound.

27.

The deceit worked. The dance of bees returned humanity, mimicking breath in the seashell. The noise was terrifying. Quetzalcoatl had his bones. Ground-up bones and blood drawn from Quetzalcoatl’s sex were the alchemical ingredient in the



crucible from which arose the new human. The sacrificial god demanded sacrifice; blood flowed free from the top of the pyramid for the infernal sun god. It was the victim's *danse macabre*, nourishment to the gods that prevented catastrophe, until Cortez landed on the Yucatan Peninsula.