

*I am a pool of water. I feel myself warm in the sunlight, liquid, filled with the blue of the sky; but I am the merest broken fragment of it, and I feel, softly, the clouds passing through me, their reflections, and once the suddenness of wings. Slowly it grows dark...I lie in the forest waiting for the moon. And softly, nearby, there are footsteps. A deer. The animal's face leans towards me. Its tongue touches the surface of me, lapping a little. It takes part of me into itself... The sensation on the surface of me is extraordinary, I break in circles. Part of me enters the deer, which lifts its head slowly, and moves away over the leaves. I feel part of me moving away, and the rest falls still again, settles, goes clear*

David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*

The prelude to disaster exists as a heightened hiatus, where the imperceptible vibrations of its imminent approach charge and shift the state of normalcy...the signs are barely perceivable, but there to be felt as a pre-emptive breaking of the surface.

Within the scale of disaster we become consumed by the mass of force, no longer contained within the bodies/experience we know, our self is absorbed into the surge of a greater beast...the beast swallows us and mixes up logic, order, sequence. Whether experienced first hand as immediate victims of impact, or remote witnesses to the mediated spectacle, fragments of worlds become mashed-up and taken away from us to become a distanced and greater entity, where a spatial fluidity of relentless reshaping occurs. Saturation of crisis and image shift cognizance from immediate presence to a state of automated detachment.

After the disaster there is a suspended state of lag...a settling where we resume a sense of ourselves. But in the healing of the aftermath we will remain fragmented, elastically stretched between the time before the disaster, and belonging to an unfolding greater dispersal, that exceeds the epicentre and resonates as a fraught relationship of ruptured landscape, time and narrative, that is impossible to holistically and authentically convey or comprehend.

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SCREEN SPACE

Flood

Kit Wise



I believe that we are also confronted with an urgent new task: namely, the consideration of how best we might prepare for climatically driven disasters that are presently beginning to erupt all around us.

[...]

There are many dimensions to this work of preparation, of which the most obvious are technical and organizational, such as strengthening disaster warning and relief services, and ensuring that they come to the aid of the most vulnerable rather than the most privileged: a task that in turn has economic and political implications. Less obviously, but equally importantly, there is also a role for the humanities in this, to the extent that our very codification of certain events as disastrous or catastrophic, as well as the ways in which we make sense of them, and the kinds of behaviour that we adopt in the face of them, is strongly informed by cultural assumptions and societal norms. From this perspective, even those catastrophes that arise from non-anthropogenic factors, such as earthquakes or volcanoes, are never simply natural but are always, also, to some degree socio-cultural. As Stephen Muecke has observed in relation to Hurricane Katrina, the 'stories told about natural disasters are crucial to the organization of people's responses in the medium to long term. While the stories of individual events are told in detail, they are nonetheless already broadly scripted by narrative forms of mythical strength.'<sup>1</sup>

[...]

A degree of ambivalence also inheres in the tangled fabric of the biblical text itself, which equivocates as to the whys and wherefores of the catastrophe that it frames. To some extent, this is a function of its multiple and shifting authorship, with at least two distinct voices belonging to vastly different time frames jostling one another for command of the detail.<sup>2</sup> Although the text insists that the deluge is divinely ordained, the instigator is referred to alternately, in the English translation, as Lord and God, names that conjure distinct images of deity: one, *Adonai*, an early epithet for Yahweh, more ancient, anthropomorphic and local; the other, *Elohim*, more recent, remote and universal. Each of these divine agents explains their intervention slightly differently. Yahweh claims to have been provoked by human wickedness alone to seek to 'blot out' not only humankind, but also all other terrestrial creatures in the process.<sup>3</sup> This is rough justice indeed, reminiscent of the brutal *lex talionis* of Attic tragedy, in which the chorus of innocents is regularly made to suffer the catastrophic consequences of wrongs perpetrated solely by their social superiors.... According to the later author who takes over the narrative around Genesis 6.11, however, other creatures too had fallen into sin, filling the whole earth or land (*erets*) with 'violence'<sup>4</sup>: now it is said to be not just humans, but 'all flesh' (*col basar*) which had 'corrupted their way upon the earth'.<sup>4</sup> As Anne Gardner observes in her 'eco-justice' reading of Genesis 6.11–13, this phrase, *col basar*, is used repeatedly throughout the Flood narrative (notably 6.17 and 19, 7.21, 9.11 and 15–17) in contexts where it evidently refers to all land animals and birds, along with humans: that is to say, all creatures who breathe air, with the possible exception of sundry water mammals and reptiles (sea creatures, who are not mentioned, apparently having continued to behave themselves). The blanket condemnation of 'all flesh' thus turns out to be something of an exaggeration: this is a key instance of the authorial shiftiness alluded to earlier! Reading

the Flood narrative in the light of Genesis 3, one might nonetheless assume that this alleged corruption of the other creatures was a consequence of humanity's initial fall from grace, and connected with the Creator's subsequent cursing of the land/ground 'for their sake',<sup>5</sup> thus making us ultimately responsible for the whole mess after all.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Muecke, 'Hurricane Katrina and the rhetoric of natural disasters', in E. Potter et al. (eds), *Fresh Water. New Perspectives on Water in Australia*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2007, p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> In my discussion of Genesis 6–9, I draw on the biblical scholarship of J. Olley in 'Mixed Blessings for Animals: The Contrasts of Genesis 9'; and A. Gardner, 'Ecojustice: A Study of Genesis 6.1–11', in N. C. Habel and S. Wurst (eds), *The Earth Story in Genesis*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, pp. 130–9 and 117–29, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 6.7. All quotes from Genesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 6.11.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 6.12.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3.17.

