

# The Epic of our Awakening

The hubris of the Neolithic mind has been much in evidence recently; witness the sexual predation of the economically, culturally or politically powerful on the weak; the many refusals to acknowledge our complicity in global warming and the bone-headed military, economic and social aggressions of our statutory leaders (see also sexual predation, global warming, above).

The ability of humankind to control events has never been more tenuous. Like it or not, we have ceded much of that control to the realm of those non-human actors that we have long ignored or, more recently, actively aggravated: now, we are collectively suffering real-life home invasions by the dark powers that we had thought safely relegated to the past, buried deep in our subconscious, or rendered impotent by our technological prowess. Is it possible that the overt expression of our atavistic aggressions is stirred by new realizations of our impotence?

Or, can we trace our bad behaviors to the first scratchings on rock of anthropomorphic gods - of the fetishization of the female form and the celebration of the virility of the bull? Have we distanced ourselves from each other and the environment and, in celebrating our otherness (our alienation) are licensed to predate with impunity, like the gods of old?

As the kids say, karma is a bitch: but it is also, more simply, less sexistly, a mirror. I was caught up in some of its pay-back earlier in the week, my temerity (surely another name for hubris) at having built a home for myself and my family in the Wildland Urban Interface was cosmically answered by the ravages of Southern California's Thomas fire.

It is no longer necessary to hike in the moonlight to experience a monochrome world. Our house now lies dark amidst the ashes of the chaparral, wisps of grey smoke rising into a smoke-smudged sky. But it looms intact, testament to the steel fire doors that protected its glazed openings, to the landscape management that eliminated much of the fuel within two hundred feet and to the gravel terrace and pool that shielded its northern, uphill flank.

On Monday evening, December 4, having been alerted to the approaching Thomas fire by our son, who lives eight miles away to the west in the small country town of Ojai, I began locking the sliding doors in place then, on turning the corner of our building saw flames leaping over the back ridge. This precipitated an immediate evacuation with time only to grab passports, abandon the half-eaten evening meal on the table, jump in the car, pick up our neighbor and exit north on State Route 150 to the three story, exterior corridor Motel 6 in Carpinteria, an appropriately carceral environment in which to spend our first night as ecological refugees.

There followed a move north to Santa Barbara, the smoke following us. We filled our days scanning our devices for news of our home, of our neighbors, family and friends, and that palpable hyperobject, as Timothy Morton would have it, the fire. Up-to-date information, it turns out, was the first casualty of the event; maps generated by Ventura County and the state portal, CAL FIRE, consistently lagged well behind news channeled in the chaotic argot of social media - those fractal fictions sometimes gelling, amongst our three

devices, sets of 'friends' and platforms, into real, current news. Out of it all we determined to conduct a reconnaissance run on Thursday, not altogether sure whether we would be able to get back into our neighborhood.

We were stopped six miles short of our goal by a road closure, but parked the car planning to walk in - confident, once inside the perimeter, that we could cadge a lift. Barely a mile into the google-projected two-and-a-half-hour walk, a friend drove by and took us to our properties.

Having confirmed the miracle of survival for both our house and newly completed guest-house, and mourned the loss of the house in which our neighbor had been staying (its owner in Los Angeles), we returned to the smoky, palm-etched Santa Barbara and next day we all three returned to Upper Ojai where standing and collapsed structures were set alike in an amazing chaparral landscape. Here stood skeletal trees, scorched rocks and ash in a grey scale that we realized reflected the intensity of the burn - the hottest areas beneath oaks bleached white while the bunch grasses' impoverished fire-offerings of cellulose smudged the land an inky black. That evening I wandered our twenty-some acres (the minimum lot area for a single-family house in this zone). Starkly illuminated by my flash-light, the land was grotesquely shadowed like some bleakly expressionist stage set for a post-atomic *butoh* performance. Sharp, chemical smells of burnt wood were carried in the breezes that stirred trails of white ash from the runnels threading the land towards the gaping gorge of Bear Creek which channeled the hottest fire, focusing the explosive Santa Ana wind like the rifled barrel of a gun and driving the flames before it. The creek-side location of my neighbor's house was fatal that Monday night as flames shot from it (we surmise) hungry to consume the caloric content of the wood framed house.

In the morning, I again tramped the land, less bewitched by the chiaroscuro of white ash and blackened branch and more enthralled by the opportunity to understand its revealed shape and behold this once in a generation burn cycle of the chaparral. The owner of the neighboring house, a landscape restoration ecologist, cherished her home but loves the land: indomitable, she will rebuild and is already counting the days to the explosion of wild flowers that will surely follow the winter rains. My survivor's guilt is somewhat assuaged.

On the weekend before the fires, I had begun reading *The Great Derangement, Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, 2016, by Amitav Ghosh. He writes that "the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast". Caught up in the fire-fueled Ojai diaspora, I was a tiny part of the global dislocations that are now, and will continue to be characteristic of our unfolding geohistory. In the immediacy of personal peril and threatened property loss, we may lose sight of our part in the great ideological, cultural and geographic shifts now upon us. It may be of comfort to some that our domestic political arrangements are but awkward laggards in this epochal transformation.

That, indeed, is a part of Ghosh's thesis: the domestic, human world of the novel (a primary



source by which modern society has historically described itself) and where society has been situated within a "sense of place" - in Ghosh's telling, one of the form's "great conjurations"- is incapable of expressing the vast cataclysm of climate change, which can only be expressed in epics such as *Gilgamesh*, *Ramayana* or even the *Odyssey* which encompass multiple universes of the human and non-human. The "regularity of bourgeois life" supported by global networks of imperialism and now neo-liberalism threatens to be entirely displaced by the end of Modernity whose signature achievement, as Jacob Burckhardt has it, was in the "discovery of the world and man". In the Anthropocene, we are discovering that we are not alone!

Upper Ojai is an area, like much of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, of intense oil production. The oil seeps that still smolder at the bottom of our road were the source of tar to caulk Chumash *tomols* (reed canoes) and the first indication to Americans that there might be an exploitable resource beneath the chaparral. 'Ojai 6', just a mile away, was the first commercial well in California, drilled in 1865. Now, the air that we breathe here is laced with the toxins from burnt brush and from the burnt-over oil and gas production facilities in the area. The resource that generates great wealth in the counties and contributes, in its application as a fuel and industrial chemical, to the shift in planetary weather patterns, is thus doubly responsible for our present discomfort.

The novel, in its portrayal of the "regularity of bourgeois life" has been displaced by a vast and unfolding petrochemical epic as the appropriate form for the recordation of our puny lives. We are freshly conscious of how society describes itself. We are freshly conscious of the agency of non-human actors as they intrude into the settled (and unsettled) patterns of domesticity in which we have ensconced ourselves. As I write, huge thunderclouds of bruised smoke arise to the west as the fires run their inevitable course to the sea.

But after a week of Ojai fires, am I yet fully awakened from the long sleep of Modernity, ready to eschew the comfortably pernicious trappings of the Neolithic mind?

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## EPA Drops Pollution Clean-Up Rule:

**The Trump administration has announced that it won't require mining companies to prove they have the financial wherewithal to clean up their pollution, despite an industry legacy of abandoned mines that have fouled waterways across the U.S.**

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt said requiring more from mining companies was unnecessary, and "**would impose an undue burden on this important sector of the American economy and rural America, where most of these jobs are based.**"

The U.S. mining industry has a long history of abandoning contaminated sites and leaving taxpayers

to foot the bill for cleanups. Thousands of shuttered mines leak contaminated water into rivers, streams and other waterways, including hundreds of cases in which the EPA has intervened, sometimes at huge expense.

The EPA spent \$1.1 billion on cleanup work at abandoned hard-rock mining and processing sites across the U.S. from 2010 to 2014.

Since 1980, at least 52 mines and mine processing sites using modern techniques had spills or other releases of pollution, according to documents released by the EPA last year.

In 2015, an EPA cleanup team accidentally triggered a 3-million gallon spill of contaminated water from Colorado's inactive Gold King mine, tainting rivers in three states with heavy metals including arsenic and lead.

The Obama-era rule was issued last December under court order after environmental groups sued the government to enforce a long-ignored provision in the 1980 federal Superfund law.

The proposal applied to hard-rock mining, which includes precious metals, copper, iron, lead and other ores. Coal mines already were required to provide assurances that they'll pay for cleanups under a 1977 federal law

Hard-rock mines in the U.S. produced about \$26.6 billion worth of metals in 2015, according to the association. Of those mines, the EPA had said 221 would be subject to the dropped rule.

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