

PREFACE

“A” used to stand for apple. And it used to be possible to believe that apples were forever, and that every year would bring the season of apple blossoms. Nothing seems so certain anymore. Now “A” stands for Anthropocene, the ungainly word scientists have coined this century to describe the current geological era in which humans are measurably affecting the Earth and biosphere in ways that only asteroids and other galactic entities used to be capable of.

“A” stands for atmosphere and albatross, both of which hang heavy around our necks.

“A” stands for after normal.

For over 30 years scientists have been warning us, and our governments, about the consequences of the startling changes their scientific instruments have been measuring. Icecaps melting, summer sea ice shrinking, polar bear populations declining, insects disappearing, forests dying. Seasons mutating, oceans acidifying. Corals not having time to recover from bleaching before the next bleaching event hits them. Bushfires burning hotter, faster, larger:

bushfires creating their own weather systems. Storms and droughts beyond biblical. Each observation, each list of numbers, each set of calculations and extrapolations becomes, for those trained to be objective, more shocking and distressing to contemplate. Meanwhile, psychologists have tried to work out why humans receiving these warnings have not acted (strongly enough) in response: one study identifies no less than 29 “psychological barriers” ranging from numbness, uncertainty, optimism bias, financial investments, to (belief in) technosalvation.¹ By contrast, social scientists argue that looking at the problem as one of individual behavior and choice becomes a way for policymakers to blame the public rather than examine how patterns of practices—in this instance, more or less sustainable ways of living—are made or eroded by the systems, structures, and policies of governments and corporations.² They question the underlying assumptions that prevent more resources from going into imagining alternative ways of organizing how we live. Others research the role of conservative think tanks and politicians, from the 1980s onward, in orchestrated campaigns to discredit climate science and promote environmental skepticism so as to forestall decisive change.³

Book after book, documentary after documentary, has tried to sound the knell. There is no shortage of facts, graphs, and statistics, not to mention vivid stories, deployed to try to *get the message through*. For many of us, we know, we know, we know, to some degree at least, that something incomprehensibly bad is happening, in which our “normal,” everyday actions—shopping, eating, staying warm, traveling to work, going on holiday—are implicated. But what do we do with that knowledge, in between picking up the kids or trying to get a gig that pays? We know, we

know, we know. Yes, we know! Alright! But what can it possibly *mean* to have this knowledge? How does it *feel* to have the existential weight of it spread around (unequally)? How do we think this through? What do we *do*—especially we in the increasingly uncomfortable middle class who can afford to buy books and watch documentaries—beyond clicking on petitions and refusing plastic bags? How do we proceed with daily life while knowing that what we assumed, like our parents, and their parents before them, was “normal”—being part of the rhythmic cycles of slow-moving evolution—will never again, in a geological time-span of 100,000 years, return? What are the chances that we, of all people in human history, should have been born into this moment of existential responsibility? And how do we face up to it? These are the questions that propelled the writing of this book.

We—Nicole and David—were walking along a beach together. It was November 2016—a fateful month, as it was to turn out, especially for the United States. David had invited Nicole, who lives and works in Flagstaff, Arizona, to speak at his university in Melbourne, Australia. David and his wife Linda had taken Nicole to their place on Victoria’s Surf Coast so she could recover from jet lag, and we could all be as far away as possible from the plumes of carbon we had helped create. In the evening, walking along the wide, sandy beach, David pointed out the fence posts that are meant to hold up the sand hills, noting that every year, the Shire Council has to move the posts back another couple of feet. Little by little each year, the hillside keeps collapsing, as the tides lap ever so slightly higher and the storms push ever so slightly further. As we walked, we talked about the trouble

with environmental writing—how some of it can be so depressing, humorless, shaming, guilt-ridden. How it can pitch “Nature” as a magical other-world separate and distinct from a human world of culture, technologies, and economies. How this separation is a symptom of the problem. We talked about the cognitive dissonance described above, and how we could feel it playing out inside us and around us. What we needed, we half-joked, was a survival guide. But as humankind, and the planet as a whole, enters these unprecedented times of swift climatic change, there are no guides, apart from computer models and sci-fi, for where we are going, and no guides for how to *live* with the reality of this reality. We decided we would try to write one.

We would write not as scientists, journalists, or experts of any kind beyond what expertise we claim as writers. We would write as citizens of developed nations, parents, friends, and active readers of science and the news. People who admit to carrying, like many others seem to, a feeling of paralyzing dread when we think too hard about the future. People who do not know better, or live better, or have access to special wisdom. People who are as flawed and selfish and full of contradictions as anyone we know. We would write with awareness of, and trying to cast a self-critical eye on, our many privileges; with a nose for our contradictions and weaknesses; and while listening carefully to those whose voices, experiences, and wisdom have been systematically marginalized.

We wanted to write a book that moved beyond useless despair, feel-good guilt, or callous denial. Toward noticing, and witnessing; toward recognizing the need for us—the two of us, and all of us—to *respond*, with care and love and justice. With grief, where it is needed, and wonder, where we find it.

We knew we needed a way to contain the immensity of our topic. Being overwhelmed by the new scale of Earth's reality—how does one fathom being party to the sixth great extinction?—was exactly the problem we were wanting to address. We would have liked to make a book that listed every earthly object that we loved, but that book would have been as big as the world. We decided we would write flash essays, in parallel with each other, one for each of the 26 letters in the Latin alphabet. We would co-opt the form of an A–Z “how to” guide. This would help provide a necessary note of irony to our impossible but urgent task.

Since we believe, all irony aside, that cooperative creative action is exactly what is needed in this emergency, we wanted to see if we could do this on a micro-scale by writing this book together as a kind of long-distance, improvised duet, from opposite sides of the world. Neither of us had tried writing like this before, or knew what would result. Every week we turned our attention to a new letter of the alphabet. We would each, in secret from each other, choose a subject beginning with that letter. It could be anything at all, so long as it was something that one of us thought important to consider in understanding the complexities of the After-Normal. Something big or small that insisted somehow to be taken note of and responded to. We would each write our brief essay and deposit it, by the appointed hour, in a shared folder online. Only then would we be able to see what “gift” the other had contributed, as we opened up the document and read their essay. To be courteous and encouraging, and help contain our doubts, we would then send a brief email in return, tuning in to some small thing we had noticed or liked. Having received the story or insight the other person had offered, we each let the next

subject that insisted on itself come into focus, and wrote again. In this way, calling back and forth, we went on, letter by letter, feeling our way as we went, until we arrived at Z. Some unruly letters sprouted more than two essays. Occasionally we made missteps and had to retrace our steps; sometimes we lost the rhythm or the melody.

We tried to resist reverence. Even as we grieve for what is happening right now as the present unfurls into the future, we look for joy in what was, what is, and what could be. Instead of grieving and moving on, as if such a thing were possible, or just hoping against hope, as if such a thing were sensible, we wanted to “stay with the trouble,” as feminist scholar Donna Haraway advises.⁴ The trouble is troubling but it’s also funny and difficult and inspiring and sad—and anyway, it’s what we have. We offer this book as an invitation to pause, pay attention, and gather strength for what lies ahead.

-
1. Gifford, Robert. “The Dragons of Inaction: Psychological Barriers That Limit Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation.” *The American Psychologist*, vol. 66, no. 4, May-June 2011, pp. 290–302.
 2. Shove, Elizabeth. “Beyond the ABC: Climate Change Policy and Theories of Social Change.” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, vol. 42, no. 6, 2010, pp. 1273–1285.
 3. Dunlap, Riley E., and Aaron M. McCright. “Climate Change Denial: Sources, Actors, and Strategies.” *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by Constance Lever-Tracy. Routledge, 2010.
 4. Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Kindle ed., Duke UP, 2016.