

## WHO IS GOING TO ANSWER OUR S.O.S.?

In an episode of "Cosmos," Neil deGrasse Tyson says that through much of recent history people have seen the earth as benign. He adds that this is only because the last forty thousand years have been relatively calm, compared to the entire history of the earth, which has experienced frequent cataclysmic events. That realization of vulnerability has reached the masses in the form of terrifying media predictions of apocalyptic mega-meteors, super-volcanos, super-nova radiation waves, or similarly extravagant natural catastrophes. It's as if we just realized that this planet we have sentimentalized as the blue marble is far more fragile (and violent) than we had imagined.

And that made me think of the attitude of the American public toward our experiment in democracy. We have a deep desire to believe in a kind of powerful political equilibrium in the United States, which might be disturbed briefly but can never be destroyed. It's like the idea of a benign natural environment. This sense of security is so strong that it manifests itself in extraordinary moments of rational disconnect. After the 2000 presidential election was stolen, and that theft was abetted by a totally politicized Supreme Court, many in the media, even those who had previously enjoyed reputations as trustworthy commentators, were congratulating our American democracy for having come through the crisis unscathed. If the man who lost the election, both by popular vote and electoral vote, sat in the White House for the next eight



years, American democracy did not survive unscathed. In fact, that might have been a fatal blow.

As I work in my vegetable garden, related things keep popping into my head. Here are a few of those thoughts, in no particular order:

Right-wingers in governor's mansions and state legislatures are slow-walking secession by subverting federal law and individual protections piece by piece, state by state. They are systematically destroying abortion rights, voting rights, collective bargaining rights, and the rights of public school teachers to teach science, history, and literature without interference from extremist religious groups. This strategy has been encouraged by the failure of the federal government to even slow it down.

Neo-Confederates, Aryan Nation members, and the wacko likes of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, are referred to by the media as "conservatives." By what miraculous transformation has this group of scruffy fellow travelers, for much of American history known as the "lunatic fringe," become "conservatives"? By what definition of conservative is this possible? Shame on all the media for accepting this preposterous convention.

For almost twenty years we have had an ultra-rightwing television news

network devoted to propaganda and disinformation, and somehow it has been accepted as mainstream, called out by just a few political satirists. Even George Orwell would have had a hard time believing this.

Three of the great progressive beacons of American history, JFK, MLK, and RFK, were assassinated in one decade. We are told that each was taken down by a crazed, lone gunman (something that few people in the entire world believe). And we go on.

There are powerful computer systems that have allowed not only the NSA but Google and all of corporate America to spy on and manipulate us to an extent never dreamed of by Orwell in "1984," not even in his worst nightmares.

We have a Supreme Court whose majority has castrated the Civil Rights Act, with the ridiculous argument that racism is no longer a problem in the United States. And they have given the same kind of evil oilmen Ike warned us about in the 50s the right to buy any election in the country.

Our stock market, for better or worse the foundation of the American economy, is what Sen. Elizabeth Warren calls a "rigged game." The manipulation of trading through the use of high-speed computers has stunned even the old hands who thought they had seen it all. We are told that regulating the stock market and the banking system is impossible, even though it has been done effectively in other countries.

There has been an astonishingly rapid concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, starting I would



suggest when Reagan set about destroying American labor unions in the early 80s. He took workers who had finally achieved real middle class status and threw them back decades. Now the union movement is in shambles, but the corporations, knowing that unions are the last group capable of opposing them in financing political candidates, are set on destroying the remnants.

Maxine Hong Kingston once called the Vietnam War "the darkness that covered the world." That era was terrible and frightening; it sent millions of angry people into

the streets. No one on any part of the political spectrum thought it was "business as usual." I would argue that the current situation in our country is far more frightening than the dark times of the 60s and early 70s. And yet, we are continuing on, all of us, as if this were somehow normal.

Where do writers, artists, musicians, and all of the people in the arts, come into this? Can we go on pretending that the political and social equilibrium that has nourished the arts in this country for much of our history is still there? I have no

answer to these questions. But I can't ignore them. They haunt me. They overwhelm me sometimes. It is interesting that we are a nation apparently obsessed with the undead: vampires and zombies. Is that because we recognize this as a metaphor for ourselves and the world we currently live in?

An inverted flag is a universally-recognized symbol of emergency. I'm not betting on UFOs responding to our S.O.S. So who is left? Can we do this ourselves? Is there still time?

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### New Books by Our Contributors

Charles Bernstein, *Recalculating*, University of Chicago Press, 2013  
*Attack of the Difficult Poems*, University of Chicago Press, 2011

Rob Cook, *Empire in the Shade of a Grass Blade*, Bitter Oleander Press, 2013  
*Blackout Country*, BlazeVox, 2009

Nathaniel Tarn, *Sur les fleuves de la forêt*, Vif Editions, Paris, 2013

Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz, *Fashioning the 19th Century*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014

Alvaro Cardona-Hine, *Memories Village*, Alba Press, 2014  
*Phantom Buddha*, Alba Press, 2013

Lyn Lifshin, *Malala*, Poetic Matrix Press, 2014

Craig Cotter, *After Lunch with Frank O'Hara*, Chelsea Station Editions, 2014

Charles Borkhuis, *Disappearing Acts*, Chax Press, 2014

Heller Levinson, *Wrack Lariat*, Black Widow Press, 2014  
*from stone this running*, Black Widow Press, 2014

Doren Robbins, *Title to Pussy Riot*, Imaginary Friend Press, 2014

Paul B. Roth, *Long Way Back to the End*, Rain Mountain Press, 2014

Wayne Hogan, *Enthusiasms*, little books press, 2013  
*Corn Bread's a Dessert and Other Things*, little books press, 2013  
*Drawings: a Retrospective*, little books press, 2013

Allison Hedge Coke, *Burn*, Mad Hat Press, 2014  
*Effigies II*, Salt, 2014

[Contributors: Please let us know about your new or forthcoming books.]