Chapter 3. Becoming Lystrosaurus: Toxic Environments, Mass Extinctions, and Other Cautionary Tales for Academics

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There are basically two kinds of species: specialists and generalists. Generalists come equipped with a set of evolutionary adaptations with broad applications, and they can eat a lot of different types of things and withstand a broad range of environmental conditions. They will do anything to stay alive and are more resistant to extinction than specialists, who usually have one or two highly advanced adaptations that can be used only for a single purpose. Because specialists often can live only in certain types of places and eat certain kinds of food, they are highly vulnerable to extinction; they will starve if they can't eat what they want.

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My wife, Neesha, is about to lose her job. She has a Ph.D. in English. Her specialty is creative nonfiction memoir. She's brilliant, efficient, professional, and fair, but she and a bunch of other professors who teach at the school where I teach are on contracts that cannot be renewed past three years. It isn't the school's fault, necessarily. My wife knew from the beginning this was going to happen. Also, it isn't just this one school. It's like this all over. Still, there's a certain coldness to it, the idea that even though this highly qualified and diligent person's performance reviews and student evaluations are consistently excellent, she's going to be let go in less than a month because that's what her contract says has to happen, and in the fall, she will be replaced by a new professor who will get to teach here for three years before being let go, regardless of how well he or she does.

And apparently this is sort of the thing now. It's happening more and more. You show them your Ph.D., and they give you a contract that's like a camping permit. After three years, they kick you out, you pack up your tent and go to the school across town, maybe camp there for three years, then they kick you out, you pack up, and come back. The teaching diet on this lifelong camping trip is invariably freshman composition. Neesha never complains about her rations. It's almost as if she's forgotten she's a specialist.

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I've been thinking a lot about specialists and generalists, about animals that survive extinctions. Inevitably, that thinking leads to an animal called Lystrosaurus.

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Lystrosaurus was not a dinosaur—it lived before the dinosaurs—but it *was* a generalist. Two hundred fifty million years ago in the Permian period when it arrived on the scene, it must have looked like the biggest dork—a chunky little doofus with teeny tiny hips and hind legs that packed gigantic Popeye forelimbs and with a face like a bucktoothed landscaping tool that tapered into a beak for shearing tough vegetation. Lystrosaurus probably got picked on, pushed around, and eaten all the time, and with no known natural defenses—no quills or armor, no claws or horns, or chomping teeth, or venom, or size, or speed—there wasn't a lot that Lystrosaurus could do about that.

All Lystrosaurus could do, really, was to keep doing its thing and hope that maybe everybody else on the planet would suddenly die, which, of course, happened, because the Earth's atmosphere turned to poison gas at the end of the Permian period, and, maybe due to its ability to dig holes or breathe underground or eat whatever plants were left, Lystrosaurus, the dork, suddenly ruled the entire world.

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In my current position (which is slightly more permanent than the one with the three-year contract Neesha has, but which is by no means a sure thing), I was hired to be a generalist, to live low to the ground, to eat whatever happens to be available, to be ugly. This was not what I had imagined for myself in grad school. I went to grad school on a fellowship to specialize in creative nonfiction, specifically the personal essay, and I quickly transformed into a cuddly little personal essay writing koala who envisioned a future spent swaying lazily in branches of some private liberal arts college and teaching two creative nonfiction courses a semester with plenty of free time to write and enough money left come summertime to take my wife and kids on vacation.

This was delusion. From inside the sealed bubble of my doctoral program, I was unaware that the atmosphere outside had turned to poison. I hadn't noticed that almost every other creature like the one I had become had walked off the graduation stage, drawn a labored, wheezing breath, and then crawled to the edge of the campus to die a slow, gasping death at the fringes of an endless job market wasteland.

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Sometimes, when dealing with matters regarding academia, there is a disconnect between expectation and reality. For instance, I can report there is never any time to write. I am currently teaching five face-to-face courses and one online course. There is a lot of grading. This is the first essay I've written in years, and I am writing it on my phone in the free seconds between answering emails, force-feeding my four-year-old, and trying to stop my other two kids from crushing themselves with furniture. As for summers off, to all teachers except for a select few,

the phrase evokes terrible ambivalence because while yes, summers off means a break from the teaching and grading, it also means no paycheck from May until September.

It is a time for burrowing underground, lying still, and taking only very small sips of air. For those on the tenure track, or for me, anyway, it is sometimes possible to teach up to two classes during summer break, but for the most part, "summers off" means I get to tell the people at my second job that they can schedule me for more hours through the week for three straight months. I get to say to a person who is only slightly older than my students, "My availability is wide open, dude. Load me up."

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Some paleontologists speculate that the proliferation of Lystrosaurus into the most abundant and widespread animal to ever have walked the Earth was due to nothing more than dumb luck—that it just happened to plod into conditions that were welcoming to it but deadly to everything else.

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When I first became an English major, nobody told me what my new life would be like, but I should have known something was up with the field from how badly all the faculty in the English department seemed to want me to be there. I was an unremarkable, undeclared sixth-year senior who had just walked out of the college of education after a dismal program assessment exam and a lackluster set of teaching evaluations. I needed to declare a new major, and the only two stars guiding my course at that point were "something I already had some credits in" and "something that didn't require any math."

I'd taken a bunch of literature and writing courses because the professors teaching them were mostly laid-back and cool—except for a couple who were dicks—and anyway I thought I could mostly avoid the ones who were dicks and just take a couple of more courses and graduate, so I strolled on over to the English department in my flip-flops and asked if I could be an English major, please. This was a crumbling department that could barely afford toner for its decrepit copier, but if there had been any money in the budget for champagne and balloon drops, they would have burned through every cent that day.

In the background of all this, a massive budgetary shortfall at the university had necessitated the closure of a bunch of programs. These were the George W. Bush years, the first extinction pulse in what would be seen later as a great dying. Whole departments faced annihilation—big programs that before then everyone had assumed were some of the load-bearing beams holding the university up: philosophy, French, geological sciences. Deans and department chairs were told they had to justify their existence with numbers. The English department was at DEFCON 1. Any newly declared major, no matter how stupid, meant a decrease

in the likelihood that the whole department would be dissolved and all the faculty would be shitcanned.

Right after I signed the English major declaration form, the chair of the English department high-fived me. It would be the last time I would receive a high-five from a chair of an English department, although, sadly, not the last time I would offer a high-five to the chair of an English department. Pro tip: English department chairs are much stingier with their high-fives when you're on the faculty.

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Lystrosaurus did not high-five English department chairs. Lystrosaurus laid low, stayed out of everyone's way, and tried not to be killed and eaten. Lystrosaurus dug itself a hole, took tiny little breaths, and hunkered down while 96 percent of life on Earth choked volcanic ash and methane gas—a great strategy for success, and one I've adopted as my own in faculty meetings.

I was telling one of my classes about my strong admiration for Lystrosaurus recently when a student exclaimed, "It's like the honey badger!" I nodded eagerly, and we high-fived, the student not being the chair of an English department. In truth, though, he was wrong. Lystrosaurus was not like the honey badger. Although the honey badger is a generalist like Lystrosaurus, the honey badger does whatever it wants. Lystrosaurus did whatever it had to.

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Before I was allowed to graduate as an English major, I was required to sit with a career counselor and discuss job opportunities and my future. The woman behind the desk opened a binder to the word "English" and told me I could be anything I wanted to be.

"You can do anything with an English major," she told me. "Maybe you'll be a journalist or something." She stamped my form and sent me out the door.

Now, as my wife neared the end of her three-year term and we stood on the threshold of financial apocalypse, I paused to wonder what other English majors' lives are like and whether anyone with this degree has really gone on to do "anything." I took out my phone and zipped off a request to my English major friends asking them to check in and report what jobs their degrees had allowed them to get.

More than 60 responses poured in over the next few hours, and I have to say I was surprised. I expected a lot of them to say they were unemployed or receiving income assistance, but only one did. Some said they were working part-time jobs in retail, and several wrote that they had recently returned to school to pursue different or advanced degrees. If the responses were arranged like a solar system, the central star being "English degree," then there would be large planets consisting of middle school and high school English teachers and college professors; medium planets consisting of editors, copyeditors, copywriters, writing center

staff, and librarians; small planets consisting of office managers, consultants, accountants, and insurance salespeople; and a vast asteroid belt of other kinds of careers: software developer, bookstore owner, storage facility manager, equipment technician, costume designer for film and TV, paralegal.

It was by no means a comprehensive survey, but it prompted some considerations. First, conspicuously absent from the results were journalists. Among my friends, it appears, the English major-turned-journalist is extinct. Second, the English major's range is global. The posts came from Japan, Korea, Europe, and all over the US, representing a snapshot of a vast English major diaspora. Third—and I only note this because of my theory that almost every English major secretly fantasizes about writing a bestselling novel—no one in my little survey was making a living writing books.

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On weekends, I work my side hustle. I sling books at a big-box bookstore. Recently, as I was punching out for my lunch break, I asked my boss how many books the store could hold.

"What do you mean, how many can it hold?" she asked.

"You know," I said, "like, if I were to shelve a book in every possible place in this whole store, how many would there be?"

My boss raised an eyebrow. "What is this for?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, physically feeling the minutes of my break passing, each one high-fiving me in the face as it went. "I'm just curious."

Another long moment passed.

"Would you say," I tried, "that there are about a million books here?"

Slowly, my boss nodded.

"Awesome," I said. "Thanks."

According to one reliable source then, the bookstore where I work has a capacity of about a million books. Each year, according to several online sources, more than 300,000 new titles are released. That means that stocking one copy of each new title released each year would fill my entire store in less than three years—and that's not counting all the books that are already in print—not the four bays of shelves just for Bibles, not the *Iliad* or Ellison or Twain or the 66 individual James Patterson titles that each have multiple copies. And next year, there will be more than 300,000 more new titles. And the year after that. And the year after that.

During a slow moment at the customer service kiosk in that same shift, I did a few quick searches for authors I knew—anybody I knew who had ever published a book. Between my store and the nearest one—which are the two biggest bookstores for hundreds of miles—I found exactly one copy of one book by one person I knew, written by the professor who directed my doctoral dissertation. The book is a literary journalism exploration of antique collecting. We stock it because we
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have an "antiques" section and, there being very few books about antique collecting, pulling the book would leave a hole on the shelf.

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All throughout my studies in English—through undergraduate, master's, and doctoral coursework—I was mysteriously content to not know what my life would be like once I had the degrees I was working toward. The only reason I can conceive of for this is that my professors were too overworked and distracted to tell me, and I was too stupid to ask. But everyone seems to agree now that, at least in academia, the situation is untenable.

There is abundant evidence that it's getting worse, too, as more universities slash tenure lines, grind them into teeny little bits, and toss them down to the throngs of adjunct instructors who are so desperate and demoralized that they'll snap them all up without fail, so that in the end, the university gets to staff the same amount of courses at a fraction of the cost without having to pay as many employees' health benefits. This is how it is now, but I wondered if life in the ranks of academia was always so tough.

I remembered reading that not long ago, under Cambridge University, archeologists had discovered hundreds of anonymous scholars' skeletons from the Middle Ages. The story featured a lot of photographs of grinning skulls and bones sticking out of dirt and a lot of text. I didn't get a chance to read the whole thing because that was the day my ENGL-1102 students turned in second drafts and 50 students were emailing me at once to try to get an extension, but I just so happened to have gone to grad school with a woman who specialized in medieval studies, and we stayed friends. So, I zipped off a message to her asking what a medieval scholar's life would have been like.

"You're the only person I know who would know," I added. She wrote back immediately.

"I have a campus interview early next week, and I'm scrambling to prepare. Do you mind if I reply when I get back? I'm in panic mode."

Indeed, this was an exciting moment for her. She had been employed sporadically since she'd gotten her doctorate, despite applying to pretty much every college-level teaching job anywhere in the English-speaking world for three years straight. As a medievalist, she was a koala, but she was out there saying, "Feed me whatever. Koala don't give a shit anymore. Forget the eucalyptus." The particular position she was interviewing for was for a medievalist—her eucalyptus. She had every reason to be in panic mode. I thanked her anyway and apologized for bothering her.

Another reason she had to be in panic mode, I recalled, was that the previous week she had been on the local news because a bullet had burst through the exterior wall of her house and ricocheted around inside until it landed, finally, a few feet from her baby's crib. I had watched part of the video from the story because
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it appeared in my newsfeed, but I hadn't gotten to see the whole thing because the night I saw it, grades for response paper seven had to be turned in for my online course. But I knew the gist—bullet, crib, scary. It occurred to me that because she was my friend, I should probably have said something supportive, and that maybe now was the right time to do that. I typed a reply:

"By the way, sorry about the bullet," but I erased it because I didn't want her to think I was the one who fired it.

"Heard about how your house got shot up. Crazy!" I typed, but then I erased that, too.

I was an English professor after all; I should be able to eloquently express concern and solidarity for this person I care about. I studied words, after all. Words were supposed to be my life. Other people are supposed to learn how to do this kind of thing from me.

The cursor blinked in silence. I could almost feel her watching the screen on her end, watching to see if I said anything else, watching the walls for more bullets to fly in from outside—sitting, watching, being in panic mode.

Finally, I just wished her luck on her interview. She didn't write back.

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Sometimes, when dealing with matters of English degrees—particularly graduate ones—there's a disconnect between expectation and reality. People expect that if you have a master's or a Ph.D. that you always have a job or that you can always get a job whenever you want. The reality is that it's always really hard to get any job. Academic jobs have to be open and posted, and even if you happen to beat the dozens and sometimes hundreds of other applicants for one of those, the hiring process takes a long time—half a year or more sometimes.

Meanwhile, bills keep coming in, bills for the rent and the lights and the car and the student loan I'll be paying until I'm in my mid-60s, but if you have a graduate degree and you apply for a regular job—like the pizza delivery job I am applying for in the hopes that working a third job will help offset the loss of my wife's teaching position—well, people tell you you're overqualified. Thus, many scholars who are just trying to keep the lights on and the rent paid find themselves in this weird employment purgatory of being not qualified enough to be gainfully employed long term at a college and too qualified to punch the clock anywhere else.

Everyone I asked about this told me that when they fill out applications for nonacademic jobs, they don't even list those advanced degrees they spent years toiling away in seclusion to get. I'm not putting my master's or Ph.D. or my professor job on my pizza delivery application, but that means there's a huge gap in employment. What am I supposed to tell them I've been doing for the last decade and a half? I once asked a fellow Ph.D. about this. "You're a creative writer," he said. "Make something up."
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Lystrosaurus waddles out of its burrow and raises its scaly countenance toward the orange sky of morning. The moon, still visible against the dawn, hangs like an exhausted tear on the cheek of the new day. Lystrosaurus grunts, scuffs his foreclaw in the dirt, and tilts his heavy, tusked head downward. There are no longer any predators to worry about here, but there is plenty of competition for resources, and it's getting harder for Lystrosaurus to feed his young. The whole world is drying up and chafing like an exposed root in the sandpaper air.

Wearily, Lystrosaurus plods across the dusty landscape once more in search of food, hoping the digging will be light today, that the soil will be loose and moist and full of fibrous bits of plant matter, because Lystrosaurus, who was kicked and jostled by his young all night in the burrow, is starting to feel the slow crush of years in his bones, and he could use an easy day for a change, because it's pretty much been one damned thing after another for Lystrosaurus lately, what with the trouble with the Subaru last week, the nasty virus that came home from the kid's preschool, the landlord who won't deal with the termites . . . plus, how long did Lystrosaurus bang away on that stupid committee spreadsheet, and now they aren't even going to use it? Scraping harder at the surface layers of soil with his powerful tusks, Lystrosaurus can't even believe this shit anymore.

How did I even get here? Lystrosaurus muses, thrusting his beak into the newly made hole to explore it for shreds of vegetation. Finding no food, Lystrosaurus snorts and begins to dig again with motions worn into muscle memory through endless hours of mindless repetition. *Am I depressed?* Lystrosaurus wonders casually.

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At the breakfast table the other day, my wife and I spoke about finances. The loss of her income will represent a 45 percent decrease in our yearly household budget unless she gets hired right back in the fall at the school across town, but she doesn't want to get hired right back. She doesn't want to get hired back ever. She is about to go wandering right off the continent of being an English professor. She says she likes the students and the work, but that she's going to learn how to do something else. She says it's unfair to expect her to live this way, losing her job and having to beg for another one somewhere else three times a decade.

"I think," she said, "I could make a difference doing something else."

I nodded. The "something else" she was referring to is medicine—a complete career shift. She will go back to school, starting all the way over, taking the basics. Statistics. Calculus. Introductory chemistry. I could feel the atmosphere shifting. The air in my lungs seemed tighter. I summoned my long experience as an English major, English grad student, and English professor, because I knew this was an important moment, and I wanted to say just the right thing.

"I mean, yeah, like, go for it or whatever," I said.

She looked at me, and I gave her a look that told her I loved her, told her I support her, told her I couldn't agree more.

Then I looked down at my bowl of cereal and sighed. I dug my spoon into the bowl. It made a soft, crunching sound, and I pictured a primordial claw digging through the ancient, barren Earth.