

US TOO: ECOCIDE AND METALEPSIS IN SUSAN CHOI'S CRISIS-FORM

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Omnicrisis besets even the novel, and how could it not?¹ Amid capitalogenic climate crisis, financial crisis, political crisis, and pandemic crisis, literature is not spared. Literary value endures its own crisis, via the forced austerity that demolishes humanities classrooms and research, the media industries rewiring cognition to the speed of the visual cortex, and the compulsory avowal that the blazing world leaves nothing for indirection, metaphor, abstraction, or beauty. And literature itself now audits its own diminishing returns:

Who can care, in short, what happens to the novel's protagonists, when it's happening in the context of the increasingly fast, increasingly brutal exploitation of a majority of the human species? Do the protagonists break up or stay together? In this world, what does it matter? ... For this reason I don't think I'll ever write a novel again.²

What does it matter? This resonant negation transpires not in an austero-ocrat boardroom, nor in a literary critic's nervy autotheory, nor even in a meta-literary interview, but in the very flux of a literary work we might otherwise call a novel: *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021). Sally Rooney attempts to metabolize her own fame in a text of sputtering narration and slackening fictionality, plagued with angst, ramifying the angst by relativizing it. What are the feelings of one young novelist up against the enormity of immiseration in this world? What does it matter? A crisis-riven world begets literary crisis.

Not all modes of literature come in for crisis equally acutely. The novel, as distinct from poetry or drama, is a worldly art, defined by pose and prosaicism, by the everyday life of everyman, by worldbuilding and ersatz totality, by the world market and capitalist totalization. Its form is thus imperiled by losing the world, and the worse things get, the faster and more brutal the exploitation of the majority, the vaster the end, the clearer

it is that novels can never be written again. Unsurprising then that Rooney keeps company among many contemporary writers who openly name a general pressure on novelness itself, in expressions that could be called “metafictional” were they not so often invested in stamping out fictionality. Novels that reject novelism or otherwise purport not to be novels take many shapes in the present, with autofiction only the most avant of the garde, and there are plenty of reasons to correlate these shapes to omnicrisis, starting at the largest scale with the possibility that the terminal crisis in capitalism provokes a corollary crisis in its signature artform.

One such crisis-form that differs from the autofictional is an insistent decomposition of narrative itself: a spate of recent novels which take themselves apart, discrediting the enterprise of plot-making, storytelling, perspective-gaining, symbolizing, and even of novel-publishing. Suman Gupta has called them “novels about the end of the novel” and concludes of their pervasiveness that “instead of speaking of *the* contemporary novel we might as well speak of *the* crisis novel.”³

Peter Vermeulen similarly identifies a pervasive “sabotage” “disabling” and “refusal” of novelness in contemporary fiction.⁴ A common technique of this decomposition is to comport as a novel for 100 pages or so, and then switch levels to an extradiegesis in which the preceding pages are revealed as merely a fiction, distorted at that—and then to switch levels again, revealing the revelation as equally distorted. *Cloud Atlas*, *Atonement*, *The Keep*, *Gone Girl*, *Asymmetry*, *Faces in the Crowd*, *Trust*—so many texts beating a rhythm of undoing that seems more and more to impugn novelization as such. Often directly announcing themselves as crisis-plagued, wielding their deformations against literary pretenses, these books not only problematize perspective and delegitimate character, but disorder any possible arrangement of events, evacuating plot. The fabricated consistencies of novels, they seem to say, no longer suit the fissures and impassés of the crisis-riven phenomenal world. It is as if capitalism’s outcome—the colossal extinction wrought by accelerating carbonization and secular stagnation—culminates not in the perfection of the novel as the aesthetic medium which has always been proper to it, but in its destruction.

Susan Choi’s *Trust Exercise* (2019) is exemplary of this disintegration: its most prominent formal feature is metalepsis, the disturbance among levels of representation.⁵ An enactment of the title’s free falling backwards to unreliable arms, the metalepsis ultimately takes the novel apart. The

story commences as a lushly detailed slow-burning quotidian sexual tragedy against a faint background of ecological threat, then implodes, exposing its own first half as a “mere novel” garbling truth; in the second part a protagonist activates a counter-novel literary genre (drama) to speak more truthfully about the crisis of sexual misconduct; and a final section rescinds any possibility of representing sexual reality. The truth will not out. A crisis peristalsis of self-undoing, *Trust Exercise* unworks narration, undermines characters, and deranges plot, leaving an exemplary crisis-form for our moment. Crisis cracks. It refuses instantiation.

Such refusal should prompt a reading adjustment: if a crisis is directly thematized, then perhaps it is not the crisis in question. This is a book about the intractable dilemmas of sexuality and power later named by #MeToo, the pervasive and complicated and probably unresolvable crisis of sexual misconduct. Easy reading will surmise that its formal disintegration simply matches the complexity and intractability of its subject. But the specific mode of this disintegration challenges that easy reading, since metalepsis formalizes a force of something else: another level tugs, where another crisis inheres under or beyond what manifests. In the sway of its multiple metalepses, *Trust Exercise* has barely broached the causes of its own disorder.

Cause constitutes narrative. An event can be iterated, but only the representation of its cause arranges the event into narrative. “The queen died” is an event, while “the queen died of grief” is a narrative.⁶ Undoing its plot, that grounding pattern, *Trust Exercise* falters at presenting cause. But in the jags of its shifting grounds, another level emerges, less of presentation than formalization: unstable terrain and terrestrial destruction, the bottom cannot hold. Reading for this earthly wavering can in turn account for a marked consistency across the metalepses: setting remains even when plot and character and narration subside, and navigating around the setting remains the province of carboniferous cars. It is the thesis of this essay that in its crisis-form *Trust Exercise* mediates ecocide, a crisis of rather less representability, and rather more generality, than the sexual misconduct to which its quaking is too readily correlated.

The fifth novel from a steady writer, *Trust Exercise* won the National Book Award and was named a best book of 2019 by marquis media including *Town & Country*, *The Millions* blog, and *The Washington Post*. Success! Its successive trapdoor trick floors, however, felled as many readers as they

wowed. “Choi’s bait and switch doesn’t feel playful or experimental,” the *New York Times Book Review* assessed; “it’s not *Gone Girl* cleverness or the amusing frustration of an unreliable narrator. It’s total confusion.”⁷ The rift in reception mirrors the rifts in composition.

Trust Exercise first depicts a young, desperately intimate couple in 1980s Houston or so, who come apart precipitously, but protract their entanglement under the direction of a charismatic gay drama teacher at a performing arts high school, whose penchant for emotional strip-mining fuels rather incendiary pedagogy. Call it manipulative. A fellow teacher appointed for a visit to the troupe engages students more explicitly, with frank sex toy talk and frozen yogurt jokes. The grown-ups are gray authorities, and the adolescents are confused.

Initially drafted before the hashtag #MeToo movement but completed and published after, the book fractures its narrative to register the crisis epidemic of sexual misconduct. Thus does the first part of the book fall away, in a rug-ripping recursive rhythm; narrative fades to black. There’s a chapter break after 131 pages, and then it begins again, notably again under the same title as the first, reiterated in bold font at the top of the new opening page. This second part commences at a literary reading at a bookstore, a scenario deployed to soon reveal that the entire preceding first part has been nothing more than a novel—and one which is especially illegitimate for its compositing of third-person narration out of real events in the life of the second part’s first-person narrator, who is not the novel’s author, and who understands herself as protagonist despite appearing only as a minor character in the novel. The narrator’s self-authorized plot in the present involves attaching herself to a theater production through which she can stage revenge. The book’s second part thus features a minor character’s ex-fictional quest to make the author and major characters more explicitly, graphically confront her experience. Their fictions elide her truth and their literary delusions amount to ethical violations, so she returns to drama as the medium of the act. This section of the overarching book unambiguously impugns novels as appropriative and obfuscatory, and best contested through first-person testimonies to empires of hurt in concert with theatrical exaltation of conflict. The social world has systematically suborned sexual mistreatment, and literary distancing in the form of novelistic representation works too exculpatorily. Only abasing real talk and dramatic deeds can really relay the crisis.

But then again. The rug rips again. The title repeats again. After the 102 pages of the second part, a third part starts. This time a third-person narrative focalizes a young woman recently bereft of her adoptive mother, and so investigating her birth mother. In some manner it is intimated that she is the daughter of the second part's protagonist, in whose narrative, for all its truth insistence, she does not even appear as a minor character. In a similar manner it is intimated that she is also the daughter of the charismatic gay teacher, who is then, presumably, predatorily, not gay. The revelatory fiction-dashing of the second part has alas left much murky. In this final section, neither the rose-colored novel nor the wounded and enraged testimonial correcting the novel can survive scrutiny, instead betraying their multiple, refractive distortions. The movement of destabilizing divulgement in each part effects not just the uncertainty of trustworthy truths amid sex and lies, not just traumatic unrealizability or perspectival plurality, but also an undoing of the novel's integuments—what an event is, what a narrator is, what a character is.

A terrible vertigo falls from *Trust Exercise's* crisis-form. It presents as a tale activated by the injustices shorthanded #MeToo—sexual harassment and violence, abuse of power, a crisis of epochal proportions scarcely documentable even in the vast viral testimony from both unknown average people and high-profile celebrities and public figures. It presents this crisis, but then again it radically insists on the insufficiencies of its own presentation, and so it finally *represents* an unavailability of crisis to thematization. Whatever is wrong, the book's recurrent rhythm of disintegration relays, has less to do with the stories we tell and more to do with this subreptive shifting itself. We feel the earth move, under our feet, the sky tumbling down, and that's what we know of crisis. The faltering formalized in metalepsis envelops the manifest turmoil of misery wrought by unruly sexuality and unreliable authority in the early 1980s within a willful destruction of the habitable earth which attacks youth and jeopardizes futurity. Up against this destruction, narrative unworks: fictionality devolves, perspective insuffices, character melts, continuities dislodge. The one significant aspect of novel form that lasts intact amid all this metalepsis is setting. Although Houston is partly displaced by anonymization, its environmental and economic features are integral to the book. This background that endures shifting ground embeds a concept: the crisis that cannot be thematized inheres in the energy capital. Houston, we have a problem.

Interpretatively, we can obviously yoke the subreptions to the psychic and intersubjective mess of sexuality and sexual misdoings. In an easy sense this fracturing of narrative—*histoire* and *récit*, narrator and character—performs a straightforward trauma theory: such unspeakable things took place no one knows how many times that no one can be relied upon to relate them. But in another sense, that which the book's undermining of interpretation surely suborns, and that with which this essay is finally concerned, the scope of the unmetabolizable is much bigger than at first discernible, even at first at the end. Indeed, it is not just narrator and character that come undone, but the very framework of trauma itself. Whereas trauma theory has become a mainstream idiom connecting overwhelm, fragmentation, and repetition with such mucilage that contemporary cultural production obsessively flexes “the trauma plot” (as Parul Seghal diagnoses), in *Trust Exercise* this over-available configuration is itself the perpetrator of misrecognition: we are so busy looking for trauma's anagnorisis, for the conclusive revelation of the individual origin story, that we cannot perceive other frames of affliction, especially collective ones.⁸ For *Trust Exercise* directly depicts problematic interactions between young adults and adults, fraught with desire and power—it accesses the #MeToo moment by figuring power imbalance through the prism of age—but the force of its vertiginous metalepsis continues to undermine direct depiction, and challenge surety about the sources of harm. All the while that the book is pluralizing sexual complexity and pain, it is also quietly, steadily alluding to a rather different intergenerational betrayal: the ecocide. We may readily assume adults harming children looks like seduction or rape—but the margins of this book are here to remind us that it also looks like the carbonized atmosphere and heat death baked-in.

The obliquity of the book's approach to this catastrophe and the reticence of its revelations negatively purveys a thought that stylized fragmentations and pluralized relativizations occlude: a whole is at stake, and there is a cause. This simplicity motors the novel's three-word opening sentence, which slyly insists that a particular kind of innocence swaddles our protagonists: “Neither can drive.”⁹ A hell of a way to open a story: negation, privation, immobility, downright un-American. Quickly it becomes clear that this is a fate worse than ordinary adolescent moving pains, since their environment is so desolately car-centric: the slightly screened 1980s Houston at the novel's center is “a vast southern city” “rich in land, poor in everything

else—no bodies of water, no drainage, no hills, no topographical variety of any sort, no public transportation or even the awareness of the lack of such a thing.”¹⁰ A forbidding landscape too flat for beauty and too dry for sustenance. This is the native terrain for the invasive species: the automobile. An alarmingly automobiled noncity, Houston is also “energy capital of the world,” headquarters to the biggest fossil fuel companies and their subsidiary industries. When the book’s protagonists try to meet, they must overcome the vastness “without the benefit of sidewalks or crossing signals, for their city wasn’t built for pedestrians . . . in their city only the poorest of the poor, or fresh victims of crimes, ever walked.”¹¹ When the young couple set their first date, the question of how to get physically proximate precedes that of how to get physically intimate: “Sarah had given him directions from the western entrance which he’d disregarded, knowing he wouldn’t be coming that way. He had been too ashamed to explain this to her, his plan involving a ride to the club, too ashamed of not having a car of his own, though neither of them had a car of their own, being only fifteen and not legal to drive for a year. It didn’t cross his mind that she felt it as keenly, the utter dispossession of not being licensed to drive in that city of cars.”¹²

The book closes, at the very end of its third part, with a young woman racing out of the high school building, through “the hot parking lot” and speeding ferociously, independently: “to the parking lot holding her car, the door and the key and the pedals of which she attacked with more force than required, leaving the gray stones of that building so far in her wake that it was only when the building was gone, the people she’d met in it dead, Robert Lord’s name given then taken away from the fancy new building expressing his vision that she understood why.”¹³ The commencing sentence and the antepenultimate sentence, the first image and the final, are driving. The closing finale is repetitively, stultifyingly, a parking lot. Asphalt as asphyxiation, driving as flight, fuel propulsion away from understanding. That’s the idea still emitted even after the book breaks down: cars seem incidental to and even ameliorative of our primordial suffering, but they wreck.

In between this closing paragraph and the opening sentence, the book underlines this constancy, as cars station pivotal events:

freedom longing (“why is solitude so fucking hard to achieve? If only she had a car, she thinks for the billionth time, she would lock all the doors and just drive”¹⁴)

arguments about whether teenagers should have jobs (“I’d be very happy if you’d quit that job, and I could quit driving you there at five thirty both weekend mornings, but you’re so determined to own your own car, you’re so convinced that not owning your own car at the age of fifteen is some sort of awful deprivation, you’ve somehow convinced me I’d be mistreating you by not giving you rides to your job”¹⁵)

the initial liaison between Sarah and Martin the visiting drama teacher (“she was sitting on the hood of her mother’s ancient Toyota Corolla ... Having just, at long last, received her own license, a milestone the enormity of which is equaled only by its sense of anticlimax and its failure to grant her relief from her pain, Sarah is hyperaware of those occasions when a body and a steering wheel conjoin. She wonders whether Martin is licensed to drive in this country...The car Martin is driving isn’t Mr. Kingsley’s Mercedes. It’s a teenager’s car, a stylish beater of the exact make Sarah desperately covets, a convertible bug, midway through extensive dermatological renovation...the crucial thing is not to be dropped off at school by her mother. Sarah is allowed to drive from her mother’s workplace to school, and from school to her mother’s workplace ... ‘Fancy taking a spin in our chariot?’ Martin goes on”¹⁶)

and the final desperate sequence in the first part, pages and pages of a girl stranded at a terrible party in her sprawling failed city, walking and walking in shame, waiting and waiting for a ride (“In this city only the very poor and criminals who had made some sort of mistake while committing a crime ever walked”¹⁷).

Cars are autonomy, cars are security, cars beckon as protection from the indignities of other people and the burns of sexual misconduct—but they dispossess. Just as none of these teenagers has the slightest idea what to expect from their becoming-adult and what to make of sex, especially with more experienced or more senior partners, none of these Houstonians have the slightest idea that cities could have been built for walking, designed for flourishing, positively transporting.

For all the radical disarticulation between the first part of the book and the second part, cars remain essential matter in both. In the second part, the automobile is accorded heft at a moment of explicit equation. Karen

and David have been to a bar with Martin, among “former warehouses” “on the literal wrong side of” the railroad tracks, in a “total wasteland.”¹⁸ A long paragraph of car and parking commentary reflects on David’s choice of parking space as a portal to his feelings (it culminates: “David parking behind Karen was a companionable gesture, in the way of herd animals sidling up to each other at dusk, to less feel the darkness and the cold. It made Karen wonder, as they unlocked their cars, whether he was less confident of his judgment than he pretended”¹⁹). There, standing beside their vehicles, ensues a dialogue enunciating an equivalence: “Even if he was fooling around with students, David had said just a few nights ago, ‘it’s not a fucking crime. Our standards have gotten so overreaching. We can’t drive without wearing a seatbelt, we can’t fuck unless the government says it’s ok.’”²⁰ On the other side (as much as we’ll ever be) of the COVID pandemic, long after this prose was penned, this example of seatbelts rings out the comparison to masking it has so often pegged in media discourse and rhetoric in the last few years. But in the beforetimes, the reference to seatbelts was less overdetermined, and the act of equivalence more striking: David thinks data-backed protective regulation for consumer safety is over-reach in the same way he thinks age thresholds for legal consent or institutional policies prohibiting teacher-student sexual relationships is over-reach. But seatbelt laws have been only the tip of the melting iceberg when it comes to the threats posed by cars. The habitable planet is burning up before our very eyes, all for the fossil fuel profits and car companies’ empty freedoms.

The equation continues in a sequence directly following, as Karen’s narrative backfills details of her childhood, including that her father was a union stagehand for lighting and sound who most concretely evinced affection for his child by furnishing her with that coveted convertible bug. The aforementioned “dermatological renovation” signals the car’s external makeover, but Karen’s dad undertakes a full body transformation: “There was nothing he didn’t know how to do: engine work, body work, he’d even salvaged leather seats for the interior. We didn’t talk much, share our feelings or thoughts.”²¹ Seatbelts may not be a bad analogy to sex lives after all, if car caretaking suffices for love.

Across the dramas and traumas to which cars prove pivotal, *Trust Exercise* charts gray waters of libidinally charged interactions—between teen lovers, between teachers and students, between gay men and straight girls,

between girlfriends. Its formal metalepsis suggests that no form adequates; gray is the only truth. Unanswerable questions abound: is it misconduct if the teacher is gay? Is it misconduct if there are many girlfriends? Is all sex group sex? If a teacher impregnates a student, who is to blame? And the sexual subjects who navigate peripheral, horizontal, vertical, and intimate relations have no compass. Amid all this indeterminacy, the clarity of car culture clangs.

When the first metalepsis occurs, after Sarah has endured her car-less journey, the second part of the book begins. From its first sentence, it commences scooping out the forgoing narrative:

‘Karen’ stood outside the Skylight bookstore in Los Angeles, waiting for her old friend, the author. Her old high school classmate, the author. Was it assuming too much, to say ‘friend’? Was it accepting too much, to say ‘Karen’? ‘Karen’ is not ‘Karen’s’ name, but ‘Karen’ knew, when she read the name ‘Karen’ that it was she who was meant. Does it matter to anyone, apart from ‘Karen’ what ‘Karen’s’ real name is?²²

Friendship is in question, but so is character. And then, by the end of the first paragraph, so is narration. For the third person relay that oriented the first half of the book, and this paragraph, twirls away: “‘Karen’ isn’t pretty, or smart, or deceptively plain until she takes off her glasses. ‘Karen’ is a yearbook name, filler, a girl with a hairstyle like everyone else’s and a face you’ve forgotten. My name isn’t and never was Karen, but I’ll be Karen. I’m not pretty. See: I’ve taken off the quote marks.”²³ And so the mode of first-person narration starts to puncture the skylight point of view, taking the quote marks off. Any reprieve is however short-lived, as the narrative persists in switching back and forth unpredictably between first-person point of view and third, often mid-paragraph, here confessional, here dissociative, here humorous, here meta.

In Karen’s timeline, the most striking dynamic is how raw and recurrent the traumatic experiences are. While the novel Sarah has penned evokes lots of ugly feelings, its sheer existence attests to a working through—Sarah is neither immobilized by nor silenced by the enigmatic or even violent sexualized encounters that propelled her teenage life. She’s a successful writer living in New York City. But this working through is indicted for prevarication by Karen’s narrative, whose shifting pronouns cast

aspersions on narration, and whose anger remains so unworked through that she shoots a man in the crotch. References to undermining the protagonicity of David and Sarah abound in Karen's portion: "Is this why Karen let her secret slip—because she wants to break into this circuit of David and Sarah, and seize attention, at last, for herself?"²⁴ And her climactic moment, when she shoots Martin with a loaded beretta instead of a blank prop gun, her admission of guilt is a separate rage shot at Sarah: "What really pissed me off about what you wrote, Karen tried to tell Sarah as Sarah knelt screaming by Martin, as if Sarah had just one stage direction but was going to do it for all she was worth, is how you wrote so much just like it happened, and then left out the actual truth. Why even do that? Who do you think you're protecting?"²⁵ These are virtually the final words in Karen's portion, and they levy the charge that novels offend in their omission of truth, in their laminate realities, in the composure they afford their compositor. Fiction doesn't stay with the trouble, and for this it will never be faithful. Drama, the students were taught by their seductive guru who may or may not have been heterosexual and may or may not have been an assaulter, is "fidelity to authentic emotion, under imagined circumstances."²⁶ But the problem is with authentic emotion, since the teenagers are only playacting. "Among them, emotional exhibitionism is commonplace. Confession is commonplace. Shriill recrimination, and reconciliation, are commonplace."²⁷ The philosophy of the dramaturg ingrains itself in the students: "A moment of intimacy had no meaning unless it was part of a show."²⁸ The subjective experiences of interpersonal affairs make goopy ground for trust, and quicksand for institutional obligations or societal organization.

In problematizing the subjective quality of experience, memory, and reconstructive testimony, *Trust Exercise* has been taken to promote a kind of single-serving truth, to each her own. Intently, though, it initiates a subtle contrast between the subjective vacillations its metalepses stylize, and the objective conditions—not mood but atmosphere, not authentic emotion but climacteric events—its setting and set cues install. Through this consistency, the book concentrates on environments and infrastructure, vehiculation and weather. Looming on the horizon, the fossil fuel climate.

A hurricane hews the first part of the book, subtly figured as the natural manifestation of the relentless car culture it chronicles. As it comes on the scene, the storm is expressly analogized to the socio-sexual distress and

metaphorized as a “wheel”: “Strange, appropriate disruptions and traumas foretold summer’s end. Hurricane Clem crawled toward them from the Caribbean, turning its wheel on the nightly newscast.”²⁹ Then when Clem arrives, its force is measured automotively: “Hurricane Clem made landfall, and turned the boulevard David had crossed at summer into a raging brown river that sucked cars from the curbs.”³⁰ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration does not record a “Clem” in the U.S. at any time; the main such record is a futurist science fiction novel from 2011, *Mother of Storms*, by the prolific John Barnes. *Trust Exercise* sinkholes character and narration, decomposing novelization as it goes along, dissipating fictionality in chasing trust—but for it, the possibility and tradition of fabricating atmosphere remains in the air. Narrators come and go, government catalogues miss, but precipitated climate sticks around.

Cars and the storms they cause orient the first part, and then cars and their superguzzling brethren condition the second part. The sequence of events in the second part is organized by an improbable quantity of air travel. The improbability stands out like a sore thumb and is the absolute condition of possibility for Karen’s version of events. According to Karen’s narrative, the very Sarah who could not afford a car precipitates a terrible car accident that somehow results in her single mother affording a plane ticket to England (and lodging for the summer), which enables Sarah to enjoy an affair with the same visiting drama expert we’re given to conclude impregnated Karen:

Sarah had spent the summer in England with her much older lover. She had gotten to do this by driving her mother’s car, without her mother’s permission, away from a fight with her mother over her mother’s refusal to give her permission to travel to England, through a red light and into an oncoming truck, totaling the car and receiving nonfatal but impressive-enough injuries... I knew these details because my mother had given rides to Sarah’s mother all summer.³¹

Even more discrepant is that Karen’s narrative, an elaborate revenge fantasy come to life, depends upon too readily available transcontinental and international flights for herself, and Martin, and Sarah, who all participate in David’s latest theater piece, despite the fact that his successes are so minimal (and presumably his production budget so constrained) that his is a con-

spicuously downwardly mobile trajectory, as emblazoned by his automobile: “David’s sports car, with the phone, was long gone. The driver’s side window of his current vehicle was a black plastic trash bag.”³² Even as wealth stagnates and cars return to trash, unthinking commercial air travel remains the structuring condition for the plot of harm and the plot of revenge.

The third part, though brief, sustains infrastructural focus, organizing itself around the physical building of the arts high school, “demolished and thrown into Dumpsters and carted off to the beach to become a fake reef for some project with oysters,” to make way for an imposing new structure resembling “a LEED-certified eco-resort.”³³ Perhaps like the paradoxical notion of environmentally responsible luxury tourism, the new school’s landscape and construction are fraught with fraud: while “huge, bright, and beautiful” it “stretched out over fake hills that been built on the site and then planted with expensive-looking native blond grasses” and hosts “glass sections that opened directly onto little fake meadows of the native blond grasses.”³⁴ Fake, fake, fake, this bogus ecology erected by authorities to better harm the young: “Claire had graduated high school only ten years ago but the building made her feel as though she’d graduated in a previous century that had thought a lot less of its children, or maybe had just thought a lot less of the way that it thought about children.”³⁵ Claire cannot gain clarity on her own conception (though who can?), even after “a subsequent Facebook announcement explained that the decision to rename the school the Robert Lord School for the Arts had been reversed due to a credible allegation of sexual abuse from a former student;”³⁶ in the book’s parting words, upon the final image of attacking the car pedals, it is “too late to go back.”³⁷

It is too late. But mitigations still matter. The wet sinkholes and parched chasms of our terraformed carbon casket are here to stay, but this setting abides as our abode. The cracking of crisis that this book purveys contrasts with the aesthetic precepts of more straightforward climate crisis narratives most critics have called for.³⁸ Instead of effects, it considers causes. Maybe we don’t need sadistic scenarios and graphic dystopias, because the effects are known and knowable, even if we disavow them. Maybe what we need instead is to home in on causes, since that’s where the solutions root. Underlining Houston car culture, this novel’s metaleptic crisis-form also tenders shifting instead of instantiability, modification instead of literalism—the figurations that link aesthetic mediation to political mediation, literary background to interventionist middle ground.

Through its successive metalepses, *Trust Exercise* produces a contrast among crises, which returns us to the logic of omnicrisis: the manifest fragmented eloquence of women suffering invasive and confusing sexual advances, so traumatic as to defy narrative consistency for both victim and perpetrator—and the latent formalization in Houstonian metalepsis of environmental annihilation. One of these crises is captivating and ultimately irresolvable, while the other is stultifying but clear of cause. It is a contrast perhaps unwelcome but surely important, between indeterminacy and the determinations in the last instance that must be negated. A climate fiction outside the narrow contours of cli-fi, *Trust Exercise* mediates crisis in the staggering of its capacity for narrative and in the residue of form that bides in the zigzag. Crisis cracks the *terra firma* like trust exercises impend falls, and so the grounds of this book bear the ecological degradations here for us too.

NOTES

- 1 “Omicrisis” differs from the “polycrisis” popularized by Adam Tooze in that it signals a universality rather than a multiplicity, one owing to the last determining instance of the economic. The term thus draws on the Marxist tradition, especially attempts such as those by György Lukács, Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, and others, to differentiate between multiplicity-complexity and determination-totality.
- 2 Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2021), 103.
- 3 Suman Gupta, “Crisis of the Novel and the Novel of Crisis,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 42, no. 4 (2015), 465.
- 4 Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 5-7.
- 5 Susan Choi, *Trust Exercise: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019). For more on this definition of metalepsis, see Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).
- 6 Grief is the cause E.M. Forster cites in *Aspects of the Novel*, where this formulation seems to originate before it proliferates across much of 20th-century narratology and narrative theory.
- 7 Elizabeth Egan, “Fast Times at Citywide Academy for the Performing Arts,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/05/books/review/susan-choi-trust-exercise.html>.
- 8 Parhul Segal, “The Case Against the Trauma Plot,” *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot>.
- 9 Choi, *Trust Exercise*, 1.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 11.

- 12 Ibid., 11.
13 Ibid., 257.
14 Ibid., 36.
15 Ibid., 50.
16 Ibid., 96–98.
17 Ibid., 123.
18 Ibid., 192.
19 Ibid., 192.
20 Ibid., 193.
21 Ibid., 194.
22 Ibid., 132.
23 Ibid., 133.
24 Ibid., 228.
25 Ibid., 234.
26 Ibid., 48.
27 Ibid., 56.
28 Ibid., 137.
29 Ibid., 13.
30 Ibid., 15.
31 Ibid., 138–139.
32 Ibid., 192.
33 Ibid., 238.
34 Ibid., 238.
35 Ibid., 238.
36 Ibid., 256.
37 Ibid., 257.
38 Most vociferously, Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).