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Book Review: *Endlings: A Collection of Poems about Extinct Animals*

by Joanna C. Dobson



About the Author

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Book Review

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An endling, as Joanna Lilley states in the epigraph to this sensitive and wide-ranging collection of poems about extinct animals, is the last individual of a species or sub-species. She goes on, “It has not yet been included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is probably only a matter of time” (2020, n.p.), thus deftly encapsulating three of the key themes of the book: the ambiguous, elusive meanings that adhere to a species that is vanishing or extinct; the impact of extinction on concepts of temporality, and the role of human language in framing approaches to other-than-human animals. Additionally, by referencing the iconic *OED*, which defines itself on its website as “the last word on words” (2021), she also draws attention to the collection’s concern with the role of a particular bounded, Western, and anthropocentric worldview in driving the world’s sixth mass extinction event.

Extinction rates today are hundreds or thousands of times faster than the rates of the last tens of millions of years, and it is clear that this extinction differs from all the preceding ones because it is driven by humans (Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Raven 2020, 13596.). Additionally, we live in a period characterised by a uniquely rich biodiversity, with a greater number of species alive than ever before in history (*ibid*). Many of them are thus disappearing before they have even been identified. Lilley’s collection is particularly concerned with such extinctions: “I’m here to find the smaller, / quieter losses, / the ones so many of us / didn’t even know existed” (94). However, the seventy-two poems also focus on several animals that might be considered emblematic of extinction, such as the dodo and the passenger pigeon, and additionally range beyond the current mass

extinction event, with poems about dinosaurs, mammoths, and other prehistoric species shedding light on important themes of temporality and evolution as they intersect with extinction.

The collection is divided into five sections, bookended by two stand-alone poems. The first of these single poems, “Beauty” (3), takes as its main subject the Javan tiger, which became extinct in the mid-1970s as a result of hunting and deforestation. The description recalls Henri Rousseau’s painting *Tiger in a Tropical Storm* and William Blake’s poem “Tyger, Tyger,” both canonical Western works in which the tiger is usually interpreted as a metaphor for something else—savagery, revolution, exoticism—rather than being allowed to exist in its alterity. Similarly, in this poem, the tiger is never referred to by name but rather reduced to the abstract concept of beauty. Here as elsewhere in the collection, Lilley’s attentive research acts as a counterbalance to generalizations, bringing the animal into focus by alluding to the numerous stripes and long whiskers that distinguished the Javan from other tiger species. Ultimately, however, the vagueness wins out and, the poem suggests, extends to, and may even give rise to, a similar distancing on the part of humans, who refuse to accept responsibility for the extinction. “The forest took the beauty,” it states; “the people / said they had nothing to do with it”.

How we talk about animals matters: it may literally be a matter of life and death. This is a central concern of *Endlings*, and each poem in the first section, “Speaking for themselves,” attempts to address it by giving voice to an extinct animal. Clearly such a venture is doomed and the poems here acknowledge this, often with a degree of playfulness, and through the use of poetic techniques such as internal rhyme and alliteration that highlight the impossibility of faithfully representing a nonhuman species via human language. “No, no,” are the first words of the dodo, who continues “I have nothing / to say. No need. / Everyone knows me.” Later, however, the bird becomes accusatory: “You like your lie / that I was clumsy, plump, / and bumbled into nullity” (8). This poem, along with others in this section, highlights the double bind of the writer who tries to evoke the presence of extinct animals. Firstly, she is, like everyone who attempts to decentre the human when writing about nonhuman animals, destined to fail since her only tool is human language. Secondly, since the animal is extinct, she can only portray it second hand: the subject is absent and the poet is forever denied her own first-hand perspective on it.

What this first section demonstrates most clearly is the truth of the claim by Lars Bernaerts and colleagues that the use of nonhuman narration may, paradoxically, “highlight and even challenge our conception of the human” (2014, 69). These poems

introduce a theme that runs throughout the collection, namely that the study of extinction may reveal at least as much about humans as it does about the vanished nonhuman species. “We are as innumerable as stars, / We are as perpetual as sun,” declares the passenger pigeon in “We Are Weather” (7), a tragically deluded statement that resonates with the hubris and ignorance of many of the humans who appear in later poems, with the obvious difference that the pigeon cannot bear any moral responsibility for its extinction. Browsing the pages of *Endlings*, readers will come face to face with, among others, arrogant and unthinking hunters killing every last specimen of the lesser koa finch to impress their employer (41), whalers harpooning entire animals and taking only the baleen (32), and nobility sprinkling ground rhino horn into their wine as an aphrodisiac (58).

Not all the humans in this collection are villains, though. The second section, “Episodes of extinction,” shows us, for example, the boy who kills the last Labrador duck because his family is starving and he hasn’t had the education to be able to identify it (24). There is also the TEDx speaker grieving the loss of the Pyrenean ibex (52), and the great-grandmother who loved the Carolina parakeets that flew around her home, “their red and gold heads like a sunset / thronging through the woods” (28). “Episodes of extinction” offers the reader a series of vignettes about the disappearance of a range of species that reminds us that the world we live in is “multiply-storied” (Rose, van Dooren & Chrulew 2017, 3). Elsewhere, Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren (2012) have demonstrated through their work with flying foxes and little penguins how nonhuman as well as human animals have ways of storying their worlds, and that these storied worlds intersect with others to create a rich semiosphere, teeming with meaning. This section of *Endlings* has some fine demonstrations of this. In “Poplars, Sycamores and Oaks” (28), for example, the great-grandmother’s story is bound up with the story of the river that runs through her parents’ farm, and that of the trees that grow there and of the Carolina parakeets that nest in the trees. It also, however, intersects with larger, global narratives of the trade in exotic birds for millinery, and the increasing industrialization of agriculture. When the woman hears that the last Carolina parakeet has died—when she hears, in other words, that these bigger narratives have prevailed—her own identity is destabilized; her only way now of connecting to the vibrant, multi-storied world of her childhood is through a desperate bodily gesture that leaves her freezing, barefoot, and alone in her yard.

When a species is lost, all the stories that intersect with that species are diminished; when multiple species are lost, meaning is in danger of disappearing altogether. Vinciane Despret (2017, 219), writing about the last passenger pigeon, puts it as follows:

What the world has lost, and what truly matters, is a part of what invents and maintains it as a world. The world dies from each absence; the world bursts from absence . . . Every sensation of every being in the world causes all the beings of the world to feel and think themselves differently. When a being is no more, the world narrows all of a sudden, and a part of reality collapses.

This disappearance of meaning and attenuation of reality is a key theme in the third section of *Endlings*, “Recorded for posterity,” where Lilley uses found text and erasure, among other techniques, to tackle the semiotic impoverishment that results from every extinction. The section culminates brilliantly in “The Last Song of the Kaua’i’ō’ō” (79), which refers to a bird that was last heard in 1987, and reads simply:

“Ō’ō.”

Like the preserved semen of the Northern white rhinoceros (78) and the endless searches for the almost certainly extinct ivory-billed woodpecker (66), the recording exposes the futility of the human obsession with archiving fragments of what should be a lively, multi-storied, multispecies whole. We are as deluded as kittens with mirrors, believing that “we can retrieve everything from behind / a shiny surface, pick up the pixels and put / them back together again” (70).

Another kind of archiving is tackled in the collection’s penultimate section, “Encounters with paleontology,” in which the speaker wanders through a museum looking at fossils, skeletons, and reconstructed animals from previous geological epochs. These poems play skillfully with ideas of temporality and scale: spectator and exhibit merge eerily through reflections in the glass cases, and deep time erupts in the present day as museum visitors are discussed in terms of their skeletons and possible evolutionary trajectories. A mother on her mobile phone is “an exhibit / of human evolution: / round-shouldered, / taper-thumbed, enhanced / peripheral vision / for simultaneous screen / and offspring watching” (88). The museum exhibits are thus not just emblems of the past but also messengers from the future, and the messages they carry are mostly warnings. “Specimen” (110), for example, reimagines the story of the spotted green pigeon as though it applied to humans and opens: “There will come a time / when there are only two humans / left in the world and they will be dead.” This powerful poem not only evokes the possibility of human extinction but also brings to mind the biologist E.O. Wilson’s idea of the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness, “a time for and all about our one species alone” (Wilson 2013).

A sense of this gathering loneliness permeates the final section of *Endlings*, “I saw you,” which is where the speaker, who often here seems closely identified with Lilley herself, situates her personal life within the vast geologic processes and accelerating

extinctions that have been the subjects of the rest of the book. In a poem about the Bubal hartebeest, an extinct species of antelope, she cups her hands in the shape of its horns and writes: “I carry the air / of you, the nothing / you have become” (117). These poems anchor the almost ungraspable idea of extinction to the small details of everyday life: the tibia of an extinct camel reminds her of the bamboo flute her father once carved on holiday (122); for a moment she mistakes her dog snuffling through the backyard forest for an extinct species of wolf (126). Her neighbors are skinning beavers and caribou, fattening chickens for the knife: in the light of all that has gone before, it’s impossible not to connect this quotidian activity to the unfolding catastrophe of the current extinction event. The speaker berates herself for her own complicity—“I’m penned inside / eternal self-indulgence” (129)—and wakes exhausted from a nightmare about Martha the last passenger pigeon (132).

In the last poem of this section, “It’s Time to Talk of Hope” (134), she sits down with a friend to discuss the crisis, and although they voice encouraging sentiments, their ideas ring hollow in the light of the rest of the collection. “Let us practise our amazement in case / it saves us” sounds like—indeed, is—a maxim to live by, but it is undercut by the bathos of the following sentence: “Let us bend to count a slug’s / four noses, instead of drowning it / in a plastic pot of beer” (134). Nothing we have learned of humanity in the preceding pages suggests that many of us will be able to practise this kind of self-discipline for long.

The final poem, the stand-alone one that completes the collection as “Beauty” began it, is titled “It Won’t Hurt” (137) and uses the flat language one might associate with clinical depression to evoke the numbness and loss of meaning that will surely accrue to a human who comes to accept the reality of mass extinction: “If you feel anything at all, / as you close the lid, / you’ll just feel terribly tired. / If you feel anything at all, / as you walk on without closing the gate, / you’ll just feel terribly sad.” It’s a sickening evocation of absence. What the world lost when the last passenger pigeon died, writes Despret, was “the unique, sensual, living, warm, musical, and colourful point of view that the Passenger Pigeon created upon it and with it” (2017, 220). “It Won’t Hurt” shows how eventually, in the wake of all the unique losses that occur every time a species goes extinct, even feeling may disappear, even the human’s own sense of being alive.

Endlings is not an uplifting collection—how could it be? It does not offer much in the way of hope. But it is a necessary one. Rose has written that in this era of mass anthropogenic death, “we need an ethical poetics that brings us into proximities that awaken us both to others and to ourselves, and thus to our responsibilities” (2013, 12). With her unflinching engagement with this almost unbearable topic, with her

meticulous research and her thoughtful attentiveness to all the species, humans included, that feature in this collection, Lilley has made a powerful contribution to such a poetics.

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