Extinctions

by

Josephine Wilson

Who is prepared to deprive life of a significant dénouement?

Jean Améry

Tales of extinction often begin near the end. The past is invoked— a prior Eden where wildness reigned and the dark earth was rich and generous, the air thick with the beating of feathers. We know from history what will happen.

Over the page, just round the corner, is the massacre. After the clubbing and shooting and plucking and boiling there is a hiatus, a pause that deepens into a permanent silence. Years, decades later—it is seldom more—that silence is remarked, and there begins a search for the Last Ones. Expeditions are dispatched. Local knowledge is invoked. And when it is documented that all is gone, that not one remains other than the odd mute captive, writers are conscripted to pen salutary tales. These remains are gathered up. There follows a mourning of the remnants, of the last few metres of a patterned cloth that will never be printed again.

These Last Ones are best captured through image, rendered in painting or etching or photograph — an old bird alone in a wire cage in a Midwestern zoo, a single male beast lowing mournfully in a concrete enclosure in Budapest; or through dramatic re-enactment — a cumbersome bird beaten to death on an island off the coast of Newfoundland, a Quagga brought to its knees on the Africa plains.

Some stories are exemplary, propitious, like the American Martha, the Last Passenger Pigeon, whose Centenary is marked in 2014 by the Cincinnati Zoo, where the bird died in a cage she shared with Incus, a Carolina Parrot. She too is extinct, but who remembers her?

On the end, all is allegory.

Book 1

Columns

Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them somewhere else, to grief.

Auden, The Shield of Achilles

Sunday January 17, 2006

Out the window there was nothing that could be called poetry, nothing wind-swept, billowing, tossing or turning in a streaky sky, nothing other than a taut blue sky and the low drone of air conditioners. In car parks across the city women pulled on soft cotton hats and cowered under brollies. Babies kicked and squalled, itchy with heat rash. Fridges groaned. Water dripped from old rubber seals. Milk soured. Fans turned. The grid strained.

Light, an excess of light, as if there had been some kind of global mistake, a wrongful accounting.

At midday the UV index hovered on perilous, dispensed like a terrible penance. If the man in Number 7 could remove the tiled roof of his two bedroom unit and look up into that vaulted sky it would not be out of the question to spot an evil archangel belaying through that dreadful gouge and dropping right into the lounge room where he sat, newspaper folded back, pen uncapped, reading the columns.

Frederick Eames picked up the remote and pointed it at the cream cylinder on the wall. Chlorine molecules rose around him, heaven-bent. Unaware of the presence of angels (either avenging or beneficent) he shuffled through the pages. Ossibus et capita inhumato. Fred had returned to Latin around the time of his wife's diagnosis and he still found it a comfort. It had been surprisingly easy to find a tutor with the same passion for a dead language— a call to the University and a consultation with the phone book and he had his man, a retired Classics teacher from a private boys school. They were both Catholic by birth, Frederick lapsed, the Professor by nature skeptical, but they had enjoyed their time together, which was largely spent mourning the introduction of Novus Ordo and the abandoning of the Latin mass.

One Saturday the Professor's name appeared in the columns. An aneurysm on the golf course? A stroke in the shower? There were no clues in the columns. If the Professor had not been

divorced he could have called the man's wife. There were no children either. He believed there was a dog called Minos, but where could you go with that? And what did it matter how you died once you were dead?

This was what Frederick Lothian thought on Saturday the 17th of January. What Frederick thought he thought. What he liked to think he thought.

The phone rang twice, and then stopped. Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotèntem factòrem caeli et terrae, visibìlium òmnium et invisibìlium.

Sometime in the 1980s Martha had dragged him off to pray with a group of Tibetan Monks. The similarities between Buddhist and Gregorian chant were astonishing, but when he tried to tell Martha she refused to listen. 'You're ruining it,' she snapped. After Martha's death he returned briefly to the church and took to hanging around after Mass to discuss his ecumenical epiphany with the parish priest, but the stupid man had glazed over and moved onto a group of parishioners fund raising for a new toilet block at the Primary School.

The cistern flushed and filled in the next-door unit. He angled the paper towards the window. Despite the excess of light outside he had no northern aspect to speak of. He blamed his daughter. It was Caroline's fault he was here. He hated the word 'retirement', but not as much as he hated the word 'Village', as if ageing made you a peasant or a fool. Herein lives the Village idiot. At 69 he was getting on, but did it have to be rammed down his throat? He tried to inhabit only those sections of the complex designed for the more able-bodied citizens of St. Sylvan's, but he still managed to run into ancient women on Zimmers and signs reminding him to Mind the Step, to go This Way for Wheelchair Access and That way for a Courtesy Buggy. Old had infiltrated his being, and that had to be the reason his left knee kept giving way and his right eye was clouding over in bright light and emitting the odd salty tear, as it was doing right now onto the columns.

He took off his glasses to wipe his eye. Out the window a blurry figure was making his way across the open quadrangle in the direction of the dining room. Was that Tom Chelmsely? Frederick stood up and put on his glasses. What was he doing out

there in the heat? Look at the poor old fellow, with his frame and leather braces and his bent old back, hanging on by a thread to his Villa. Any minute now Tom would be up for reclassification, and bundled out of his two-bedroom semi-detached into a tiny single brick box with a television, a kettle and a pop-up toaster. Look at him. It was a wonder they had ever let Tom buy into the Independent Area.

Frederick sat down. It was just too painful to watch Tom hobbling on the Zimmer in the fierce heat. Why would you bother going all that way for an indigestible meal? There was no shade out there and the temperature must be well over forty degrees. Fred had been to one or two meals at the dining room and he wouldn't be going again. Tom could have called for a gopher to take him to, but then that might have given the social workers a leg-up when they came to re-assess his meds and mobility and check off boxes and add up the columns and announce that Mr. Thomas H. Chelmsely was no longer capable of reaching down to wipe himself or squeeze out his own teabag, and he and all that was his were to be shrink-wrapped and trolleyed without ado across the green to the Supported Living Units, which were just a hop, step and a jump from the High Care Facility, where they were all headed anyway. They might as well have erected the Villas over a sawdust pit in the ground, because that was how close death was at St. Sylvan's. No archangel beating above you with soft Latin wings, but a dark stinking shit-hole right beneath your feet.