

The Extinction Project: Scientific And Ethnographic Research Through Playwriting

Derek Lee Barton

Author's Note

The Extinction Project was developed at Northwestern University in the Department of Performance Studies, and performed in Chicago's Rhinofest in 2014. It is an example of how ethnographic research, personal narrative, and nonfiction may be animated through performance in the interest of social change.

It is one product (my dissertation being another) of several years of fieldwork in rural towns and forests of the Florida Panhandle. This fieldwork was carried out in the immediate aftermath of the Deepwater Horizons spill of 2010, when a pall of fear covered North Florida and its coastal communities, many of which depend upon the Gulf's teeming marine ecosystems for their livelihoods. The performance that emerged was part of the answer to a larger question: How may one perform non-human species in ways that promote ecological sanity?

I'm not talking here about the dancing, singing animals of Disney films or the orientalist spectacles of nature documentaries, with their exotic landscapes seemingly untouched by human hands, but about capturing experiences common to all sentient beings, experiences like loss, loneliness, or love, which hold the power to bridge vast gulfs of difference. The goal is to arouse, through these shared narratives, an imagination courageous enough to believe that non-human beings are somehow not unlike us, and therefore not unknowable.

Derek Lee Barton (PhD, Northwestern) is a playwright, performance artist, and scholar whose recent work explores how performance practice and theory can respond meaningfully to ecological concerns. His scholarship has appeared in *Readings in Performance and Ecology* and *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*. Derek's solo show, "Professor Rikvold and the Giant Squid," was featured in Chicago's "Around the Coyote" Festival. Two of his plays, "Billy: A Post-Apocalyptic Comedy," and "The Submarine Mare and Other Hindoo Tales," have also been produced.

The interviews are all transcribed verbatim, though Mr. Wallace's name was changed to protect his privacy. The irregularities in his speech have been retained as much as possible: they were the fits and starts of a man trying to access something that had slipped from his grasp, just as the play tries to access animals and plants that are gone forever.

The included sound file was recorded and directed by Peter Engel Storms, and performed by Audrey Cole Gulotto, Janet Cole, Jody Compton, and Doug Cole. It is an excerpt from Anthony Phillip Heinrich's *Columbia: or the Flight of the American Passenger Pigeon*, a symphonic poem depicting Heinrich's impression of the vast flocks of the now-extinct bird he encountered on his travels in America. This work has not been performed in over 100 years and has never (until now) been recorded.

The 2014 production was directed by Anna Bahow with the following cast:

Derek Barton as himself
Bill McGough as Arlen Wallace

Ensemble:
Anu Bhatt
Cameron Feagin
Brett Lee
Cheryl Roy
Omer Abbas Salem



The Extinction Project

The Presentation

(The beginning of a scientific presentation. A podium and screen with title “The Extinction Project.” An old style carousel slide projector is in the middle of the room. The slide transitions throughout simulate the effect of carousel slides, though they are actually from a digital projector. Enter DEREK, the playwright.)

DEREK

“The following relates the author’s search for an endangered tree in Florida’s Panhandle. In the fall of 2010, the author”—that’s me—“traveled to North Florida in search of a disjunct population of *Taxus floridana*.

(Slide: Figure 1.)

“—the endangered Florida Yew—thought to exist in Johnson’s Juniper Swamp, near the author’s hometown. The population was reported in 1928 in the journal of the Torrey Botanical Society. The trees have not been seen since. The yew tree is only known to grow within a few square miles near Bristol, Florida, and is a source for Taxol, a preferred drug for cancer treatment...

(SFX: A flurry of wings.)

“This contributes to research on... contributes to... the author posits... explores... interrogates... this expands our understanding of...

(crossing more out, rips out pages, wads it up and throws it on the floor)

“—the author’s grandfather, the late Woodrow Wilson Shuler, cattle rancher and swamp fisherman... Arlen Wallace, amateur botanist and World War II veteran, approached my grandfather to guide him into Johnson’s Juniper Swamp... In 2010, the author began a search of his own, traveling across a Gulf Coast reeling from the Deepwater Horizons spill, bracing for the impact of toxic oil on formerly—

(crossing out)



Fig. 1: *Taxus floridana*, the Florida yew. Photo by Richard Carter, Valdosta State University, Bugwood.org.

“on *heretofore* pristine beaches. An interview with Mr. Wallace reiterated the theme of loss and disappearance, as the aging botanist *struggled* to—“ blah blah blah...

(Skimming further down)

“All scenes featuring Mr. Wallace in this show are taken from transcripts of that interview, though Mr. Wallace’s name has been changed to protect his privacy...” Hmm... “Coastal towns, signs proclaiming, “We’re still open!” and “No oil here!” ... The author plunges into one of Florida’s most treacherous swamps. Searching for... searching for... “

Interview Part 1

(The living room of an old-fashioned Southern home. Botanical prints hang on the walls. DEREK is interviewing ARLEN WALLACE, 83, well-respected amateur botanist of the old guard of citizen-scientists, staunch Libertarian, and blue blood Southern gentleman through and through. He is dignified but frail. During the interviews Arlen often flips through a folder of records and newspaper clippings, trying to jog his memory. They are seated.)

DEREK

Um... and since then um I've uh been working on my doctorate up at Northwestern. I'm in Performance Studies so I'm a... a.. writer and a playwright. um and a performer and one of my interests is in like how... um... the sciences and like ecology is expressed in the arts, like in the performing arts and the visual arts um so I'm kindof looking at the way the arts and, you know, the sciences uh overlap in that way. um-

ARLEN

Well you ask the questions I'll answer em best of-

ARLEN (OVERLAPPING)

-my knowledge and you can fit it in wherever you will.

DEREK (OVERLAPPING)

Sure.

DEREK

Ok I'll do that then... Maybe we can start with something that's kind of personal to me cause my grandfather was Woodrow Shuler. Um, and he's passed away, maybe gosh it's been a while now. Maybe about ten years ago and I remember him telling me about a man from Chattahoochee.

ARLEN

Yeah.

DEREK

Coming to him about looking for um something out in the National Forest. Do you remember this?

ARLEN

I don't remember that specifically.

DEREK

Ok. Yeah.

ARLEN

It coulda been me. But it-

(clears throat)

Uh, uh... I don't 'member... I don't 'member the particuhlar situation. And um... I can tell ya.... uh.... several years ago... uh... when I uh... had to go for a... a for my annual physical checkup... during that... duri- during that uh checkup about where they were doing... I- I forgotten exactly which... which thang they were checkin at the time but maybe she found something she didn't think was just right, so she.... she went and got the doctor and came back and then they took and they put- kept me in the hospital for... uh couple weeks there and ... uh... I had a terrible loss of memory so I don't do very good I had the... I can-... I can, I can remember some thangs but I- I did the... I- I had a herbarium and uh... I have given that herbarium to the University of Florida and its down der now and uh..... and 'at, 'at just happened recently in the last six months-

DEREK

(faintly)

I see.

ARLEN

And uh and uh cours uh.... uh... up until.. up until that time... I had a very good knowledge—I thank--... of uh of the plants... of of of the Apalachicola River Area. uh I... I don't think I could uh.... stand up to that

(stutter)

as a result of that... loss of memory...

The Vegetable Lamb Of Tartary

Video¹ of Derek in Johnson's Juniper Swamp. (Figure 2.) After video, actors enter with vegetable lamb puppets. It is storytime. Slide: "Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp. 1: The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary." Image of vegetable lamb (Figure 3).



Fig. 3: The vegetable lamb of Tartary. By Lee, H. [public domain] via Wikimedia Commons.

¹ To view the video ("Smilax makes you smile," Johnson's Juniper Swamp, Bristol, Florida, 10/20/2014), see liminalities.net/21-4/extinction.html

DEREK

The vegetable lamb of Tartary is a plant that grows sheep as its fruit. The vegetable sheep are connected to the mother plant by an umbilical stem, and graze on the vegetation around the plant as far as its stem will reach. When all the vegetation around the plant is gone, the lamb dies, leaving a perfect circle of bare ground. The vegetable lamb was thought to be the source of the wonderful “tree-wool” imported from India starting in the late middle ages. Otherwise known as cotton.

(Pause.)

I am concerned with loss. Of the past and its fantasies. Of memories real and imagined.

(Pause.)

My grandfather, the late Woodrow Wilson Shuler, gave my parents an old cotton field just outside Bristol, Florida for a wedding present. It was in the middle of pine plantations owned by the nearby paper mill. My parents put a single-wide mobile home on that field and started a family. Two miles away is Johnson’s Juniper Swamp. When I was 13 my parents built a house and sold the mobile home. I was at school when they took it, but I imagine it going down the road and disappearing into the forest. Well, not really “the forest.” Pines don’t normally grow in rows like that, all the same age, bare dirt and dry needles underneath. But I didn’t know that.

(Pause.)

There’s this unsettled feeling as an adult. Like while you’re away or not looking, things change, vanish. Or maybe were never there at all? I am concerned with...

(Pause. Goes to get Torrey journal² at podium. Reads.)

“In 1927, Herman Kurz of the Torrey Botanical Society was guided by Mr. L. R. Carson of Bristol, Florida about a half mile into the... To our amazement we found....”

² To read a scan of the 1927 journal article, go to liminalities.net/21-4/extinction.html

(Flipping through pages
obsessively. Finding his place.)

What I mean is... What I'm trying to say... To our amazement we found...!

Moa

Title: "Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp. 2: Giant Moa." A desk appears for JULIE with a sign on it: "Bureau of Extinction." Julie is stamping forms at desk. A knock.

JULIE

Come in!

Enter DOUG dressed in khakis and a pith helmet. Think David Attenborough.

DOUG

(brightly)

Good morning!

JULIE

Morning.

DOUG

Is this the-

JULIE

This is NOT the Office of Mythical Beasts.

Beat.

DOUG

Actually I was looking for the Bureau of Extinction.

JULIE

We are room 440. Mythical Beasts is 440M. "M" as in Mezzanine. Everything here actually existed at one time or another.

DOUG

So then you are-

JULIE

This is not the mezzanine.

Beat.

DOUG

Clearly not.

JULIE

People always get it confused.

DOUG

How dreadful for you.

(beat)

I'm looking for the Florida yew.

JULIE

Is it extinct?

DOUG

Um. Not quite.

JULIE

Must I explain to you that being almost extinct is like being almost pregnant?

DOUG

Ah. Well, what if it were functionally extinct, like some left but unable to reproduce?

JULIE

Oh don't tell me you're one of THOSE people. Well I'm not paid to argue semantics with goody-two-shoes conservationists. If its not extinct we don't have it.

DOUG

Oh. Um, sorry to bother you. I'll just...

(starts to leave)

JULIE

Oh well I didn't say you had to go. I mean, don't you even want to look around? We have woolly mammoths, giant moas.

DOUG

I'll come back after I've found the yew.

JULIE

Tell me about this Florida yew. *Taxus floridana*, is it?

DOUG

Yes, exactly. Well its endangered, and it grows only in North Florida. Though its not a very big tree it can live for several hundred years. They grow in ravines, and you find the oldest trees near the bottom, because as they grow their branches sprawl across the ground and root where they land. So the plants basically tumble down the ravine in slow motion over their life-span.

JULIE

Interesting. Plants are tough sells. Not like charismatic megafauna... whales, pardi, cute animals... national birds... Hard to make plants *sexy*, you know to get people to care about *foliage*.

DOUG

I know, but there's a human interest story too! Like that the writer's grandfather almost went to look for it, but he didn't and then he died, the grandfather I mean, not the writer. And then the writer moved to Chicago. And, well, he wrote this play about it, and its kind of, well... its like, you know, when you look back and you think "what if this had happened?" or "what if I had stayed there instead of leaving?" or, well, you know, kind of like... um... gosh, I feel like I'm not really explaining it right...

JULIE

So, its basically a metaphor.

DOUG

What? Yes! Yes, exactly! A metaphor for things you've lost. But also the importance of looking, even if it is gone. Because when you look at it you can grieve its loss...

JULIE

Yes, yes I see! And its also a metaphor for childhood, home, all that.

DOUG

What?

JULIE

And nostalgia. Losing an ideal.

DOUG

I don't know about all that...

JULIE

Or is it a simile? Is the play saying that extinction is *like* all those things or that they are really the same concept?

DOUG

I'm sorry you've lost me now. And I have to go, I'll come back another time! Thank you!

JULIE

Please, no! Don't leave me here! I mean, you haven't tried the simulator. I mean, I hate it here please take me with you. I mean, stay here I don't want to be alone.

Pause.

DOUG

Why don't you just leave?

JULIE

I could, but I work eleven hour days. And then my commute is two hours each way. It doesn't really make sense to go anywhere.

DOUG

Where do you sleep?

JULIE

I keep an air bed in the desk.

DOUG

No family?

(Beat.)

That's none of my business. I'm sorry. Well, goodbye! That tree could go extinct any minute!

JULIE

Wait, I just remembered: I have a Florida yew simulation!

(Brings out VR goggles.)

DOUG

Really?

Doug puts on the VR goggles. Julie takes out small bongo drums and plays an accelerating accompaniment.

DOUG (CONT'D)

So where is it? I don't... who are all these people? Oh my God. What is that bird??

JULIE

It's a giant moa. Extinct New Zealand megafauna. The hunters are Maori.

DOUG

Its so beautiful. Its feathers look like fur. And huge! But where's the yew? Wait, why are they killing it?

Doug sits on the edge of the desk. Julie comes to sit next to him.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Leave it alone! Stop! No.

Julie watches Doug watch the bird die, then takes the helmet off Doug and puts it on this desk. He gathers up some things.

DOUG (CONT'D)

That was horrible. You tricked me.

JULIE

Yeah, I know.

DOUG

Why?

Julie busies herself at desk but does not respond.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Why did you lie to me?

JULIE

Why don't you just go?

DOUG

I want an answer.

JULIE

Cause I wanted you to see!

DOUG

Why?

JULIE

Cause maybe you'd care!

DOUG

About the Moa?

JULIE

No one cares about extinct animals. But I think the heart remembers. Its why fairy tales all have deep dark forests. Why people believe in bigfoot and the

Loch Ness monster. There's ghosts everywhere. When was the last time you saw a real forest?

DOUG

Goodbye.

JULIE

But there's more simulations. I'm sure one of them has a yew in it somewhere...

DOUG

I don't care anymore. I'm kind of upset now, and you're waxing poetic. Its all a little too much.

JULIE

I see. Ok well I'm coming with you.

DOUG

What? Why? What are you going to do?

JULIE

Anything but this; I guess I'll help you find that yew tree. Well, lead on.

(Julie and Doug start to exit.)

And I think I might like to get married....

They exit. Bell rings as projection of Moa hunt appears (Figure 4). "The natives added that, in times long past, they received the tradition that very large birds had existed."

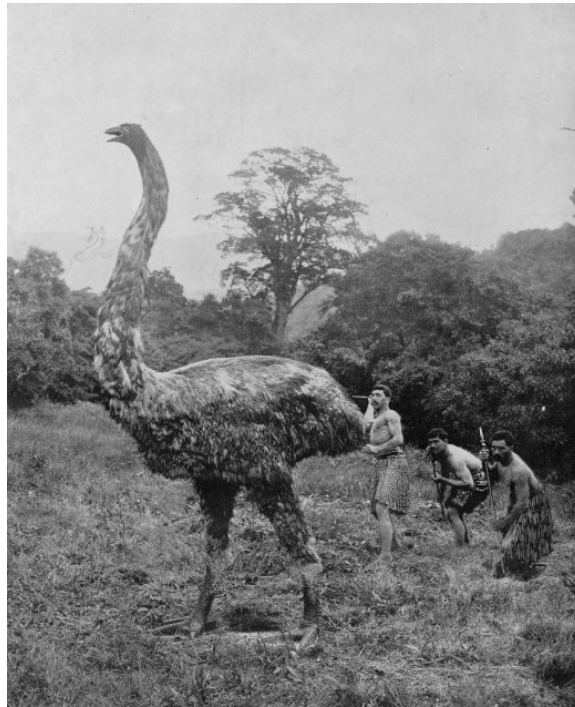


Fig. 4: Moa hunt. By Augustus Hamilton [Public domain],
via Wikimedia Commons.

DEREK

Virtual reality. Could it be that in the future, if you want to see *coyotes*, *pandas*, even a forest, you'll put on one of these?

(turning to the projection)

Even this image is a virtual reality. Moas vanished long before photography was invented. It's a composite image. The bird is stuffed.

(puts on the helmet)

Photography itself is a kind of magic trick. It restores moments into the present that have vanished. Or, like this photograph, moments that never existed at all. This show is also an attempt at a magic trick. When an illusionist makes a woman disappear, you always know he's going to bring her back. But there's that tense moment when she's gone... where did she go? Something is wrong.

She's missing. Until she reappears... oh, there she is! Everyone sighs, laughs, claps. What a relief! But what if she didn't come back? Could you enjoy the rest of the show, or would you be thinking the whole time "Where did she go? Why is she still gone?" In the same way the moa makes us anxious.

Where did it go?

Why hasn't it come back?

Interview, Part II

Arlen seated. Derek stays at the podium. Arlen addresses Derek as if he were seated in the living room though Derek addresses his lines to the audience. Mrs. Wallace, Arlen's wife, offstage.

ARLEN

And uh and uh.... so uh... at- when I got- when I was uh when I got out a dah war I flew as uh.. as uh member of a- of a team on a on B-24s. I was- and ah

(long pause)

I ah.... I flew 30 lead missions..... I flew in da... in da crew of the 30 lead missions o- over in dah o- over in dah- outta England... o- over Germany and.. parts uh.. Europe ... so

(long pause)

and den uh course after I came back, an g- g- got my degree in in forestry.....

MRS. WALLACE (O.S.)

(genteel Southern accent)

Would you like anything to drink Mr. Barton? A glass of tea? Some coffee?

DEREK

Thank you ma'am. I'm fine.

MRS. WALLACE (O.S.)

Do you want anything Arlen?

ARLEN

My throat's a little dry. I could use some water. Thank you dear.

Houting

Title: "Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp. 5: Houting (Coregonus oxyrinchus)" A restaurant. Doug and Julie enter, sit.

DOUG

Hmm. I like this place. It's a nice restaurant don't you think?

JULIE

We haven't eaten yet.

DOUG

Well but don't you think it has a nice feel to it? I mean the decor and the mood?

JULIE

Uh, sure.

DOUG

"Uh, sure"? Is that all you can say?

JULIE

I don't go to a restaurant for mood or decor. If I wanted nice decor I'd go to an art museum. If I wanted mood I'd stay home and... burn incense or something.

Silence.

DOUG

What's up with you?

What up with *you*? **JULIE**

I'm just fine. **DOUG**

JULIE

Okay. Then we're both fine... It's okay not to talk when we're looking at the menu.

Pause.

DOUG

I never said we had to talk.

JULIE

A comfortable silence is okay.

DOUG

I never said it wasn't!
(beat)

Well. Flaming mango cheesecake. That's dramatic.

JULIE

You're a flaming mango cheesecake.

DOUG

Was that a joke? Well, that's more like it!

JULIE

I think jokes are better when you laugh at them, not when you say "its a joke!"

DOUG

Okay Julie. What's up?

JULIE

Say something were up, which its not, but hypothetically. What if I don't want to talk about it? Is it okay if I don't want you to know everything that's on my mind?

DOUG

You're doing it again.

JULIE

Doing what?

DOUG

I don't know. It's hard to describe.

JULIE

Good. Then don't. What are you ordering?

Doug starts fishing in his pocket.

JULIE (CONT'D)

Are you doing what I think you're doing?

Doug pulls out a beautiful, smooth rock from his pocket.

DOUG

Time for the Truth Stone.

JULIE

In a restaurant?

DOUG

Yep.

DOUG ceremoniously places the Truth Stone on the table between them.

JULIE

You first.

DOUG

But-

JULIE

Your idea. Go.

Doug gingerly picks up the Truth Stone.

DOUG

Okay. So. I'm afraid that you've changed your mind about us. And that you're leaving but I just don't know it yet-

The Waiter, with perfect timing, appears out of nowhere.

WAITER

My name is Gustavo and I'm going to be your waiter today. Our special tonight is a pan-fried houting filet, served with a caramelized fennel beurre blanc and fingerling potatoes. It's very fresh, there's only a few of them left. We are, unfortunately, out of the passenger pigeon.

Bell and projection of houting (Figure 5).

"After its decline during the late 19th century, the remaining houting population in the lower Rhine collapsed in the first three decades of the 20th century. It was thought extinct but a small population was recently discovered off the coast of Denmark."

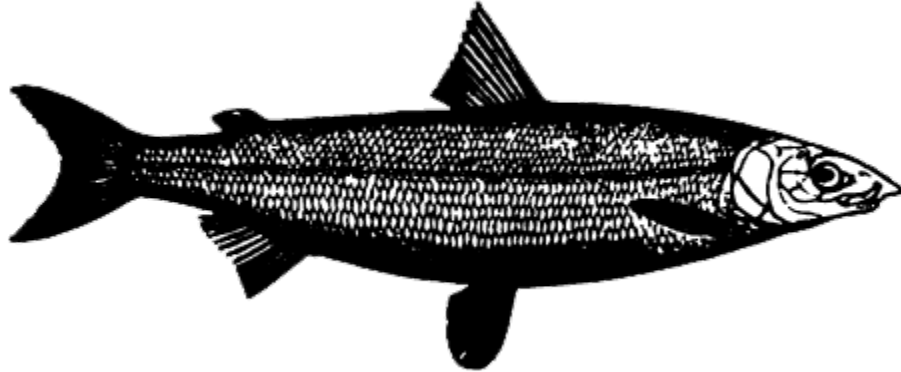


Fig. 5: Houting. From 'An Introduction to the Study of Fishes' by Albert C. L. G. Günther (1880). (<http://extinctanimals.petermaas.nl/>)

Interview, Part III

ARLEN

When i got over there, they sent me from England over to.. to uh... to uh... uh...
what's that country right next ta England?

DEREK

Ireland?

ARLEN

No

DEREK

Scotland?

ARLEN

Uh... potatoes!

DEREK

Ireland.

ARLEN

Ireland. Ireland. They sent me over there to go up for.... uh... navigation trainin and uh... i uh... from that point on.... i only flew when they flew lead missions. So I uh all of the other airplanes in the in the 453 (foh fifty third) bomb group that I was in when we lead a mission uh... uh I uh... I flew no guns in the front. i had a navigation place in da.. I hepped with the.. and when you fly those missions, the enemy had da look.. uh.. maybe gun emplacements along da.. along the uh... uh... the regular routes up to... most of those important German targets.

(pause)

How in da world did I get off on that?

DEREK

(laughing)

I, ... I asked how you were, how you became interested in botany.

ARLEN

Yeah well.. well when I came back home I I hadn't I didn't get my degree before, so I went back went back to the university and i uh i think had a year and a half left so i got i got that... i uh... i uh... i graduated with honors too... i uh... only one in the family, that is uh, i kinda-

ARLEN

eh gotta keep that keep that, uh.. and uh

DEREK

That graduated or graduated with honors?

Beat.

DEREK

You were the only one in the family that got honors or that graduated from college?

ARLEN

I no, I'm da only one that got, the rest of em graduated too, but they just got a regular graduation, you, you know it dudn't mean a whole lots but anyway I always bring that up I. I.. when its, when its when we're having fun, uh, I can, I can I can use that mmhmm i wouldn't, i wouldn't dare uh be serious about that I had more sense than others in the family, because THAT wouldn't be right.

Dusky Seaside Sparrow

Walt Disney World. "It's a Small World" plays in the background. A cage with four birds and a sign: Dusky Seaside Sparrow. Doug, dressed in his naturalist outfit with a name badge, enters walking backwards docent style. He leads Ester, 68. Ester is a new-agey hippy gone to seed. She probably plays guitar and owns a lot of cats. Projection: "Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp. 4. Dusky Seaside Sparrow."

DOUG

Here at Walt Disney World Resort, we have one of the world's foremost captive breeding programs. Scientists from major universities around the world work here to help keep cherished species from disappearing from the planet.

Ester raises hand.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Yes? Question?

ESTER

Why bother? What's in it for you guys?

DOUG

We here at Walt Disney World Resort believe it is everyone's responsibility to do their part in caring for the circle of life, and for our fellow passengers on Spaceship Earth.

Ester grunts.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Now here you'll see some very special guests here at the Cherished Species Pavilion.

ESTER

You mean endangered species, right?

DOUG

We call them “cherished species.” But yes. And actually the preferred term is “numerically challenged.” Now these birds are called Dusky Seaside Sparrows. They were native to Merritt Island.

ESTER

What happened?

DOUG

DDT was used around Kennedy Space Center to combat mosquitoes. It had a heavy impact on their numbers. They also suffered from habitat loss when the swamps on Merritt Island were drained and developed. Because the Dusky Seaside Sparrow has such a small range, and only travels a few miles in its entire life from where it’s born, it was very sensitive to disruption in its environment. These are the last four of the bird known to exist.

ESTER

Wow the last four. Hi little birdies. Yes, hello birdie. Hi little guys. Or... girls?

DOUG

These are all boys.

ESTER

Boys? Not much of a breeding program, is it?

DOUG

We’ve been breeding them with related species. There’s only one female left, but she’s still out there somewhere. Her name is “Green Band.” They’re named after the color-banding on their legs. This one here, for example, is “Orange Band.” “Green Band” was last seen in the wild three years ago, when she was banded. We’re not sure where she is now.

ESTER

No ladies huh? Poor fellows.

DOUG

We're hoping that she'll be recaptured.

ESTER

Don't worry fellows. She'll show up.

DOUG

Now if you'll just follow me we'll get a closer look at some of our birds at the Feathered Friends Encounter Area.

ESTER

I'd like to stay here for a minute, if that's okay.

DOUG

Oh, of course.

Ester sits, looking into the bird's cage. This is not in Doug's script.

ESTER

Hello boys.

DOUG

I can tell you some more about the sparrows. They built their nests in moist cord-grass around ten feet—

ESTER

You don't have to talk.

(Pause.)

Just sit with me.

Doug sits on the bench.

Ester (CONT'D)

You believe in God?

Pause.

DOUG

I'm not supposed to talk about religion, ma'am.

ESTER

It's okay. No one's around.

DOUG

There's cameras.

ESTER

They can read lips?

DOUG

The cameras have microphones.

ESTER

Oh.

Pause.

ESTER

You're an atheist aren't you?

DOUG

Wha-

ESTER

I know. You can't talk about. But I'm right aren't I? Just nod your head.

Doug nods reluctantly. Ester smiles.

ESTER (CONT'D)

All you kids are now days. I was too at your age I suppose. Well. Atheism is for the young.

(pause)

I don't talk about God much, but I'm glad she's there.

DOUG

She?

ESTER

Yep. My God is a she. And she shows me things. Like years back, when I was trying to quit drinking. She showed me something in my alley. I'd never noticed it, but someone had scratched into the concrete, you know like when it was wet, they'd scratched some words in it. "Let God," it said. Just those two words, but it was enough. Haven't taken a drink since, and she's been with me. She shows me things I need to see. Like these little guys.

(Looking at the birds, then at Doug)

You got a girlfriend?

DOUG

We broke up.

ESTER

Oh. Sorry.

DOUG

It's alright. It was a while ago.

ESTER

But you're single?

DOUG

Yep.

ESTER

Particular reason?

DOUG

(smiles, shrugs)

Got me.

Ester looks back at the birds. Pause.

ESTER

Hmm. Do you think they've got a god?

DOUG

What? The birds?

ESTER

Yeah. Like a bird-god.

DOUG

Not something I've thought about that much...

ESTER

They have to. I bet for them it's just like the sky. Winter is cold, rain is wet, God is. I bet they don't even have to try. Cause having God is hard work. You have to ignore a lot, like genocide and quantum physics and how things don't work out a lot of the time, or not forget all that exactly but know it's true and yet have God anyway. Tell God that you don't mind, all that stuff. It's okay. You tell God that you still believe. Cause God needs us too. Can you imagine being that big and great, bigger than everything. And being all alone. How could you stand it? If you didn't have someone who needed you.

DOUG

Yeah. You're right.

ESTER

I am?

DOUG

Sure.

ESTER

Hmm. Well. You're young. But let me warn you, you'll hit a patch, could last months, could be years, where everything just stops making sense. It's like if you drove home and your house wasn't there anymore. Someone else's house is there. That's what it feels like. But it's not forever. Just remember I told you that when you get there. But you're too young to understand that now.

DOUG

No, I'm not.

They look at each other.

DOUG

When did that happen... for you?

ESTER

Hmm. Well. There was this one day, it had rained, and the sun had come out and me and my husband were out for a walk. There was steam coming up off the asphalt. He was walking up ahead with the dog and I was lagging behind. I was deep in my thoughts, and it had felt like for a while that there was something coming up between us and, you know, nothing had been said, but it was like ready to be said. And suddenly up ahead of me he stopped. And I walked up next to him. He turned to me and gave me a really searching look. You know, like when someone doesn't just look into your eyes but their eyes move around your face as if they were taking everything in that you were thinking. And he said, "I smell brownies."

(Pause. She smiles.)

That was it. "I smell brownies!" I took a sniff, and sure enough someone in the neighborhood was making brownies. And that was it. We kept walking and said hardly another word to each other the whole evening.

(Beat.)

I can't remember the last time I made brownies. I love brownies, but I won't make them for myself. Maybe for someone else.

DOUG

What happened to him?

ESTER

How do you know anything happened?

DOUG

Well, it just sounds like one of those sad stories where something bad happens.

ESTER

Hmm. Well. Three days later he got in the car. Said he was going to the store. Never saw him again.

DOUG

Never?

ESTER

Nope. He mailed me divorce papers a few weeks later. Its been... what? Twenty-seven years now? And about three years ago I heard he'd passed away. Had a stroke. So that's that.

DOUG

Wow.

ESTER

Yeah. She's a doozie, ain't she? Quite a sense of humor.

By “she” she means god. Pause.

ESTER (CONT'D)

It okay if I sit here with these guys a while?

DOUG

Of course. Stay as long as you want.

Doug starts to leave.

ESTER

So say someone were to make brownies and try to bring you some. Would “they” let you do that?

DOUG

Yeah. I think that would be okay.

SFX: Dusky Seaside Sparrow call³ (Figure 6).

BELL and projection of sparrow (Figure 7): “But the day Orange Band died there was a faint sound out there in the universe. It was a small cry: “I am zero.” -‘My Name is Orange Band.’ Robert J. Waller.”

³ to hear a recording of the dusky seaside sparrow song, see liminalities.net/21-4/extinction.html

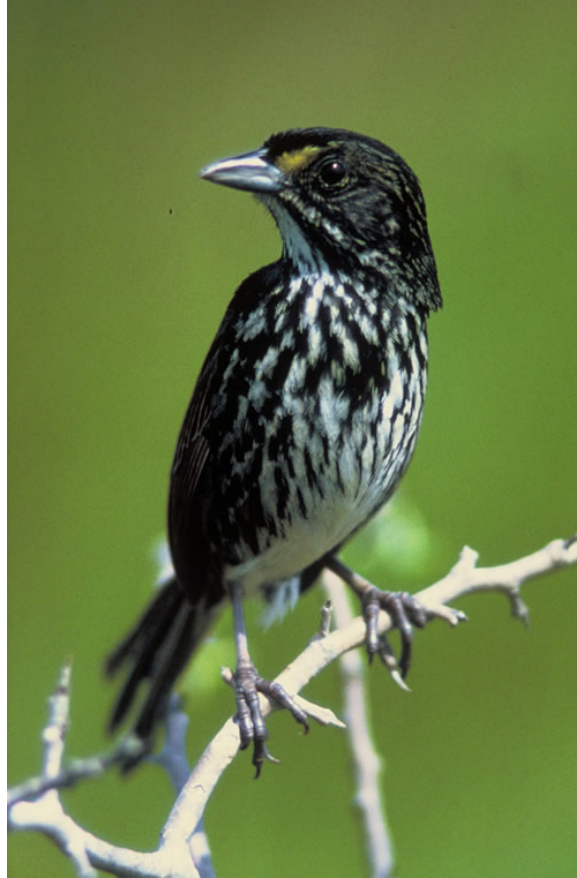


Fig. 7: Dusky seaside sparrow. By P. W. Sykes [Public domain],
via Wikimedia Commons.

Interview, Part IV

DEREK

Um, well I was gonna tell you what I recall about my grandfather. Um.

ARLEN

Yeah.

DEREK

And that, uh cause I you know I, I I wish like, now that he's passed away, I wish that I'd asked a lot more questions

ARLEN

Yeah, well, we always, we we always do that. And uh, uh, I had several friends around Bristol That were interested in the you know the wildlife and all that around in the and i uh i handled for for the uh.. for the uh uh oh waddaya call the, this..... the uh.... hold on i'll get it in a minute... i'll think of it in a minute.....

Long pause.

DEREK

(gently)

But i was gonna tell you Arlen, that um that my grandfather built roads-

ARLEN

Yeah.

DEREK

-for the national forest. He was uh he ran the motor grader, so he knew all those roads out there-

ARLEN

Yeah.

DEREK

-and what i remember, and I think we might have even talked about it once briefly, um, is that is that you were looking for some Florida yew trees? that... that somehow might have been out in the Apalachicola National Forest.

Slide of the title page of the "Torreya" journal. During the following, intermix slides of my trek into the swamp with slides of the plant species mentioned (Figures 8 and 9).



Fig. 8: The Border Of Johnson's Juniper Swamp.

DEREK (CONT'D)

The Journal of the Torrey Botanical Society. 1928. "The luxuriant mats of a number of species of Hepaticae and Musci attest to the very humid atmosphere of this hydrophylic forest. To our amazement in this contrasting habitat and among such strange associates, we found the supposedly very 'selective' *Taxus Florida*na, or Florida Yew."

(flips through pages)

I'm concerned with... loss... The safe place you thought would be there that isn't... traveling through my memory like Scott Bakula in *Quantum Leap*: anyone ever watch *Quantum Leap*? I loved that show. He would travel through time fixing things that went wrong in the past. We love that fantasy, that we can go back and make things right. It's a beautiful utopian vision, but I don't buy it. The past craves acceptance, not revision. If I don't accept the past, then I have to repeat it over and over, thinking "maybe this time... maybe next time..." When I accept the past I can grieve it; I am freed from the compulsion to repeat, and repeat, and repeat, and repeat... At the current rate, a species goes extinct about every 20 minutes. That is about how long this show has been so far. 3...2....1... (rings a bell).



Fig. 9: Several miles inside the swamp with my brother, Sean Barton.

Thylacine Cynocephalus

Projection: "Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp. 5. Thylacine (Thylacinus cynocephalus)." Enter DOUG in a lab coat. He advances the slide. Title: "Thylacinus cynocephalus: Extinct, or merely undetectable? A case study." Slides throughout of researchers carrying out the study.

DOUG

Abstract:

The present study proves, by means of a paradoxical methodology, that the Australian marsupial "tiger" known as the thylacine cannot be said to be extinct based merely on a lack of sightings. This paper then extends these findings to show that all extinct creatures are actually not extinct at all, but merely undetectable using current methodologies and instruments.

Method:

"Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." This maxim led the

researchers involved in the present study to theorize that animals said to be extinct may not actually be extinct at all, but may merely have become unobservable. An analogy will come to mind for anyone familiar with the famous thought experiment known as Schrodinger's cat, in which a cat is sealed in a box with a device that has a 50% chance of releasing a deadly poisonous gas. Since the cat's fate can only be ascertained by opening the box, the poor unfortunate feline is said to be neither wholly dead nor alive while the box is still sealed, but in a quantum state somewhere in between. This is also true of the thylacine, in that extinction is not an observable phenomenon, but merely an absence of observability. This is a state about which nothing may truly be known.

The researchers (Figure 10) set out to ascertain the location, numbers, and condition of a population of thylacine reported by undisclosed sources, under dubious conditions, to be in the Chicagoland area as recently as 1998. The researchers struck out into the Lincoln Park area, walking through the grass, stopping for lunch at a neighborhood establishment (where they enjoyed excellent bento boxes with cold noodles and tempura), and finished their investigation at a rooftop party that they heard from the street and managed to crash. During this period, no thylacine were observed.



Fig. 10: No thylacine were observed in the Lincoln Park Conservatory.



Fig. 11: No thylacine were observed in or near the bento box.



Fig. 12: We thought we found a thylacine near the cornhole game, but after careful study determined that it was only a Yorkshire terrier and that we had had too much tequila.

Conclusions:

The conclusions drawn from this trial are simply stated: that no thylacine were observed during a certain outing in Lincoln Park by the researchers. The researchers have agreed that rather than ceasing to exist, thylacine may have acquired any number of adaptive features, such as an ability to camouflage themselves at rooftop parties, or the ability to sense the approach of humans and run away very quickly. In order to claim with any certainty that the thylacine are extinct, the researchers would have needed to look everywhere in the universe all at one moment to ensure that no thylacine might be hiding, for example, behind a moon of Jupiter or in a distant pulsar. This lies, of course, outside the current limits of science.

Thus absence of detectable thylacine cannot be said to serve as conclusive evidence of their extinction, but merely as “absence of evidence.” The thylacine may better be said to occupy the inconclusive space of Schrodingers subtle feline friend, a space in which it neither wholly exists nor does not exist. And so it shall remain, until its quantum waveform is resolved by attainment of the technical ability to see everywhere at once, or by someone spotting its jovial dog-like visage loping, carefree, across the Australian Outback.

Slide of thylacine (Figure 13). “In 1983, Ted Turner offered a \$100,000 reward for proof of the continued existence of the thylacine. However, a letter sent in response to an inquiry by a thylacine-searcher in 2000 indicated that the reward had been withdrawn.”



Fig. 13: Thylacine. By Baker; E.J. Keller. [Public domain].

Dodo

Projection: "Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp. 6. Raphus cucullatus"

Enter Ester, looking perplexed.

ESTER

After all this time. All these years. What does this mean? Some joke? These scrabblings and cooings. Or chirping? What sound did it make? Something that wakes you from a dream and already half lost to memory.

(listens)

Is it even there at all?

(rushes off to check, leaving us alone for a long long moment in the dark; finally returns)

God has quite a sense of humor. Seventeen years, sitting behind a desk in a dusty room. Flipping through magazines, eating, sleeping. I pray every morning for the willingness to get out of bed. And God has sent a steady stream of people. Oh yes there is the man with the bushy white eyebrows. He is my bad habit. Then there is the young woman who gasps whenever I look at her. The cat that hates me. That eats my food and kills songbirds in puffs of colorful feathers on my drive. And the young man down the street, who mows the lawn in yellow plastic flip flops.

(sits abruptly)

And now in my basement. This thing.

(holds out a book open to a page with an illustration)

A bird that has been dead hundreds of years, and there's one in my basement. I have prayed every morning for as long as I can remember. I pray for something to shift. And someone asked me the other day, that if God's will was for me to be alone, could I accept that? I have come to expect very little really. My God is an ancient miser, stingy with His miracles. Then this morning I go downstairs looking for my dehydrator to dry the last of the apples and there is this fucking dodo bird in the laundry basket.

(pause)

It seems to not know how to live. It flaps its stubs of wings, tries to stand, rolls over onto its side. And yet there is a look in its eye of utter contentment, as if it's useless body is a profound joy. It opened its beak and it made... a sound... The sound I cannot quite hear, like a sound in a dream. What did it sound like?

(silence)

A miracle. Right here. A completely useless miracle. If a dodo can appear in my basement — anything is possible. And yet here I am.

(pause, deep in thought)

What should I do with it?

Slide of dodo (Figure 14). Projection: "These we used to call 'Walghvogel,' for the reason that the longer and oftener they were cooked, the less soft and more insipid eating they became. Nevertheless their belly and breast were of a pleasant flavour and easily masticated." Lights change. Enter Derek.

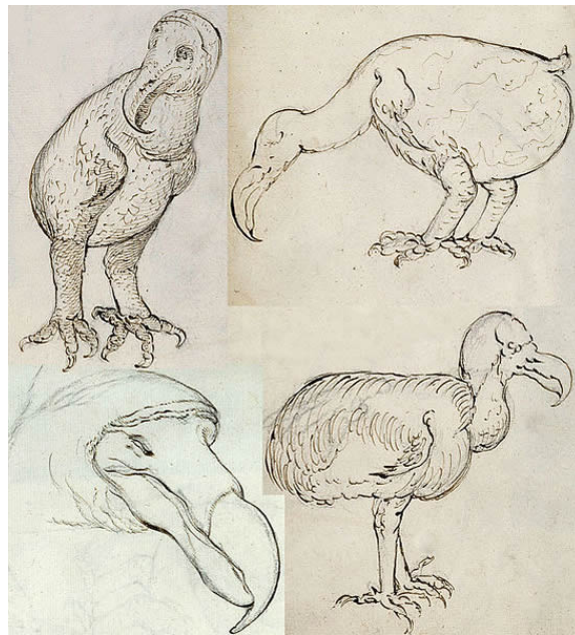


Fig. 14: Dodo. By Creator:Joris Joostensz Laerle [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

DEREK

Of course that could never happen, right? Something that's extinct is gone forever. Not just dead. But dead dead. You don't get much deader than extinct. Right?

The Pyrenean Ibex

Projection: "Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Johnson's Juniper Swamp 7. Pyrenean Ibex (Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica)" Enter Doug in his lab coat and Ibex Spirit (Figure 15).



Fig. 15: The Pyrenean Ibex. Joseph Wolf [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

IBEX SPIRIT

Nothing is ever lost, you see.

Other Ibex Spirits run across the stage. Doug is seated across the table from the Ibex Spirit.

DOUG

Can you imagine it? A failure, yes. But in other ways—Seven minutes! Something that should have been lost forever. Back for seven minutes!

IBEX SPIRIT

We run across an endless plain. Grass bending in the wind. A few trees, but the horizon is nearly unbroken. The plain is right here, behind everything that is. We are there together.

DOUG

There was something wrong with her lungs. We pulled her out of the vat and she breathed! I held her in my hand. She had fur, brown and black fur. And her little moist eyes looked at us. She gasped for breath but could not breathe.

IBEX SPIRIT

We were all pulled back. All at once. Into a broken motherless fatherless body.

DOUG

We intubated her. But she did not last long. But seven minutes! Seven! She was alive.

IBEX SPIRIT

All of us. The endless herds from the endless wilderness, all yanked back into one body. A brief, airless, gasping, pain-wracked life. And then it was over, almost as soon as it began.

DOUG

No. I don't think we will try it again. It was difficult. Seeing her. It was wonderful and terrible and a miraculous holy and unholy thing.

IBEX SPIRIT

It is over.

DEREK

In a sense, I still envisage my childhood home as “where I’m from.” As an adult, I’ve been waiting for a new sense of home to replace the one that disappeared. It’s pretty simple, really. A small house. A garden where I’ll grow basil and tomatoes and zinnias. Lots of Yorkshire Terriers. Herds of Yorkies running around. And a partner. A sunny office where I can write. Pretty simple stuff, really.

Projection: Slide of Ibex (Figure 16) and “The Pyrenean Ibex became the first taxon ever to become ‘un-extinct’ when, for a period of seven minutes in January 2009, a cloned female Ibex was born alive before dying from breathing difficulties.”



Fig. 16: Anu Bhatt as the Ibex Spirit.

Interview Part 5

ARLEN

Well, well there was a... a situation, I don't remember all the detail, but south of south of Bristol and north of the forest in dat as swampy area

DEREK

Right, right. Johnson's Juniper Swamp

ARLEN

Yeah, yeah, well, uh-

DEREK

I think is what it's called-

ARLEN

I uh uh I never did find dat

DEREK

Right, right.

ARLEN

I never did find it in der but der was a, there was a record, of uh of of uh when dey put those trails through there, and then before then that there was a record of florida yew in that swamp

DEREK

Okay

ARLEN

I never did uh I did get uh uh with the.. Wilson Baker the the [unintelligible] in Tallahassee and and and uh uh another fellow that has that has written alot of botany books Gill Nelson, was ah, the three of us we cut us... we went on the other side of that swamp

ARLEN (OVERLAPPING)

and cut us a trail through the swamp

DEREK (OVERLAPPING)

You did?

DEREK

Ok.

(laughs)

That must've been hard work

ARLEN

It was! eh it was alright but all the way to the paved road and so we were goin- we had- we had da we had... great plans all durrin that time and we had time- we had time ta do it but den what happened, uh all of us had other things that interrupted we never did get back walkin dat trail i'm i'm i'm almost positive we we woulda found it

DEREK

You think so?

ARLEN

we dut- but still- uh still uh, i couldn't i couldn't vouch for it bein there we coulda hadta seen in there. But that was one thing, I went—I talked to lots of folks

DEREK

Right.

ARLEN

About it and uh.. uh i remember especially goin on that road that was ah from ah little bit south of bristol, the one across there to uh uh.. wha what wha wh one across there to uh- what the little road. there's another road over there comin from, goes through hosford

DEREK

Hosford, yeah yeah.

ARLEN

Whats the next road down der?

DEREK

Um... so is this going north south or

ARLEN

Yeah goin nar sah. it was

DEREK

North-south

ARLEN

when ya get to hosford, that road goes right straight on in da next little community down der

DEREK

Oh, Wilma.

ARLEN

Wilma.

DEREK

Wilma.

ARLEN

n- n- no

DEREK

No?

ARLEN

no dat ain't da one

DEREK

Oh, Telogia!

ARLEN

Telogia.

DEREK

Telogia. Yeah.

ARLEN

Eh there's a paved road.... but i went down dat road because they told me people... some people worked that worked in der had something to do with that... swamp that lived along that road

DEREK

Ok.

ARLEN

So i i went most of all of there talkin to em, and i might've might've run into yo grandfather.

DEREK

That's very likely, yeah, cause he lives- he lives on that road, that- that road is highway 67

ARLEN

Yeah pr-

DEREK

And it goes from Telogia WEST.

ARLEN

Yeah.

DEREK

And my my grandfather lived on on that road. That's where I grew up I grew up on that road.

Derek laughs.

ARLEN

I been, right- I been where you grew up.

The American Passenger Pigeon

Derek exits. Projection of a morning sky. Some music from the Columbiad. Arlen sits alone in his chair with his folder of newspaper clippings. He looks out into the audience as if listening to a question being asked by them.

ARLEN

(addressing the audience as if
they were now the interviewers)

Well yes they did name some after me. There was... Three of em... They named three of em after me... Hold on. They were... I'll remember it in a minute... They were... "wallaceii". There was a... a uh.. a conradina... You can find em on the internet if you do a Google search with my name... But there was a conradina and a... Hold on. Esme?

MRS. WALLACE (O.S.)

I'm in the kitchen!

ARLEN

(calling to her)

What were those three —

She knows exactly what he's talking about. As she names the plants images of them appear on the screen.

MRS. WALLACE (O.S.)

Conradina wallaceii, hypericum wallaceii, epigea —

Arlen closes his eyes, as if the recitation of the plant names were a lullaby—the rest of this scene might be a dream Arlen is having. The doorbell rings. Mrs. Wallace stops her

*recitation but it is completed by the projection: *Conradina wallacei*, *hypericum wallacei*, and *epigea wallacei*.*

MRS. WALLACE (O.S.)

Arlen, it's Mr. Audubon. Should I tell him to come back later?

ARLEN

(to the audience)

I can tell him I'm busy but maybe you would like to meet him. He's a biologist and a painter—studies birds mostly. Do you mind?

Arlen keeps asking some variation on this question until someone in the audience replies "no." Then: enter John James Audubon, famed naturalist and illustrator. In the 2014 production he was played by Derek with a mask of a historical illustration. As Audubon speaks the projection behind him changes to an image of the passing flocks of pigeons (Figure 17).



Fig. 17: Passenger pigeons and hunters. By Smith Bennett[2]
[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

ARLEN

John!

AUDUBON

Arlen. You won't believe what I saw today. I...my apologies. You have guests.

ARLEN

They're researcher. I bet they'd like to hear about it. Would y'all like ta hear Mr. Audubon?

He elicits a "yes" from the audience.

AUDUBON

"Well, Arlen, it was like nothing I had ever seen. As I watched, I began to mark in my notebook, making a dot for every flock that passed. In a short time finding the task which I had undertaken impracticable, as the birds poured on in countless multitudes, I rose and traveled on. The air was literally filled with passenger pigeons; the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse, the droppings fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow; and the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose. Before sunset I reached Louisville. The Pigeons were still passing in undiminished numbers, and continued to do so for three days in succession."

The doorbell rings again. Sound of door opening.

MRS. WALLACE (O.S.)

Yes? Well now you can't just—

DOUG (O.S.)

Ma'am if you'll just follow me. Let's try not to make too much noise.

Enter Doug and Julie with stool pigeon. He moves the stool pigeon around on the end of a stick. Ester follows with her laundry basket. The dodo is in it, covered with a towel. Mrs. Wallace comes behind them, flustered.

MRS. WALLACE

And you can just march yourself right back out or I'll call the police. Arlen!

JULIE

I'm sorry ma'am, I told him he should call first but he —

ESTER

(a strange cooing call comes
from the basket; to dodo)

Shh. Shh now.

ARLEN

They're friends Esme.

MRS. WALLACE

Oh! I didn't realize. My apologies. And look at me with flour all over me. If I had known we were having a party — I'll just go and change. Makes yourselves at home.

Mrs. Wallace exits.

DOUG

Around this next corner, if we're lucky we'll get a glimpse of-

Sound of wings. Gunshots from OS. Julie cries out.

DOUG

Stop! Leave them alone!

A pigeon drops from the proscenium.

AUDUBON

Passenger pigeons were cheap grub. They were everywhere, traveled in immense flocks, and were easy to catch. They were food mostly for slaves and

servants. In New York in 1805, you could buy them for a penny apiece. They were hunted commercially and shipped to the city by the barrel-full. The French called them Pigeon de passage. "Pigeon of passage," because of their huge flocks passing overhead. In 1857, a bill came before the Ohio Legislature calling for their protection. The Senate responded as follows...

He produces a letter, which he hands to Doug.

DOUG

"The passenger pigeon needs no protection. Wonderfully prolific, having the vast forests of the North as its breeding grounds, traveling hundreds of miles in search of food, it is here today and elsewhere tomorrow, and no ordinary destruction-

ESTER

(with regret)

"no ordinary destruction..."

DOUG

"...can lessen them, or be missed from the myriads that are yearly produced."

ESTER

How is destruction "ordinary"?

AUDUBON

Only a few decades later, Charles Drury of Cincinnati, wrote: "One foggy day in October 1884, at 5 a.m. I looked out of my bedroom window, and as I looked six wild pigeons flew down and perched on the dead branches of a tall poplar tree that stood about one hundred feet away. As I gazed at them in delight, feeling as though old friends had come back, they quickly darted away and disappeared in the fog. It was the last I ever saw of any of these birds in this vicinity."

Audubon picks up the dead pigeon. Projection of Martha with sign (Figure 18).



Fig. 18: Martha, the last passenger pigeon. Smithsonian Institution [public domain].

AUDUBON

My apologies. This is rather sad stuff, I suppose. I shall get going.

ARLEN

No, no not at all!

AUDUBON

I really must go.

ARLEN

Well, I'll show you out then.

Arlen and Audubon exit.

ESTER

(reading the sign)

“Martha, last of her species, died at 1pm, 1 September 1914, age 29 in the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens. Extinct!” Hmm. Old bird.

JULIE

Do you think she knew?

DOUG

What?

JULIE

That she was the last.

Musical fanfare and show biz lights. Everyone looks around in surprise. Derek enters dressed as a vaudeville magician: top hat, black coat and tails, magic wand, monocle. Mrs. Wallace follows as his assistant. She is the most glamorous thing you’ve ever seen, and is wearing a 40s era gown covered with sequins and bird plumes. She wheels around a disco ball on a rolling stand. Arlen comes back on dressed as a WWII flying ace. Sound of planes flying overhead; the sky full of birds transforms into a sky full of bombers and fighter planes. Mrs. Wallace begins setting up the act. She places the disco ball, brings out an old phonograph, hangs a USO banner, hands Derek a microphone.

DEREK

Good evening everyone. How are we all doing tonight? It’s such an honor to be here with you brave men and women of the 453 bomb division. The USO salutes you. I salute you! The USO has brought me here to entertain you with a feat of prestidigitation the likes of which you have never seen. Tired of watching the sky in fear of death from above? Well tonight we will watch the heavens in awe and wonder. We will hear the sky filled with music and song. Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, for your delight and amazement, I am going to summon a flock of the extinct American passenger pigeon. Impossible, you say? To bring an extinct species back to life? How will he do it? Well I shall do this tonight, and more, through the power of music! You see while I was sifting through dusty tomes in my library, looking for arcane magical formulae, I came across a

very special piece of music by an early American composer: a German immigrant by the name of Anthony Philip Heinrich.

MRS. WALLACE

Heinrich was born in Bohemia to a prominent family of merchants. His family's fortune was lost, however, in the Napoleonic Wars, and Heinrich was stranded in America.

JULIE

How exciting!

MRS. WALLACE

A few years later his wife died.

JULIE

Oh.

MRS. WALLACE

He was in his mid-30s, penniless, and alone on a new continent.

JULIE

Well, what did he do?

DEREK

He took up composing!

ESTER

Good for him!

MRS. WALLACE

He started out from Pennsylvania. Following the Ohio River, he journeyed over 700 miles on foot.

ESTER

Good for him.

DEREK

He settled in a log cabin near Bardstown, Kentucky and made music.

DOUG

What sort of music?

DEREK

Music about birds and the people he met. Variations on American folk tunes and bird songs. Songs about a young country. Slave melodies, Indians, banjos, and rivers.

DOUG

How quaint.

DEREK

Songs about Bohemia.

DOUG

He was homesick.

ESTER

Of course he was.

DEREK

He wrote a symphony about the passenger pigeon. He called it "Columbiad, or the Flight of the American Passenger Pigeon." There's no recordings of the piece. This is music that, as far as we can tell, no one living has ever heard.

He turns on the phonograph and the music begins (Figure 19)⁴. Mrs. Wallace turns on disco ball and lights dim. The lights from the disco ball fill the room.

Lyrics in original German, with English translation by the author, read:

⁴ From the Columbiad, or Migration of the American Wild Passenger Pigeons, Part II, by Anthony Philip Heinrich, (1858). "I. Dies Nachtgewölk ist nu rein Tauben Chor." Directed by Peter Engel Storms and performed by Audrey Cole Gullotto, Janet Cole, Jody Compton, and Doug Cole. 2014. Listen to the audio track at liminalities.net/12-4/extinction.html

Die Welt umnachtend braust von West das zahllos riesige Chor, Dem wilden Donner gleich erdröhnt der Lüfte hohes Thor, Die Wälder schütteln bebend sich, des Meeres Wogen brausen Und Selbst das Erden Echo heult hinein wie Sturmes sausen! Der Jäger lenkt entsetzt das Rohr in's jagende Getümmel, Und massenweise stürzt die Brut vom nachtsbedeckten Himmel! Verwirrt und stöhnend flüchtet rings der Thiere banges Heer; Der Wanderer steht, und betend wallt sein Herz erdrückt und schwer. Da ruft der Geist der Ewigkeit dem Sterblichen in's Ohr: "Erkenne Gott! Die Nachtgewölk ist nur ein Tauben Chor."

The nighttime world roars in the West, the countless immense choir, Like thunder, shakes the high gate of the heavens, Forests tremble and quake, the ocean heaves and foams And even the earth echoes like from a howling storm. The hunter, terrified, aims his weapon into the rushing turmoil, And the brood tumble by the score from the night-covered sky! Confused and moaning the frightened creatures flee; The traveler stands and prays, his heart heavy and sorrowful. Then the Spirit of Eternity speaks in the mortal's ear: "Praise to God! This dark cloud is only a choir of doves."

DEREK

Now just imagine, as hard as you can, with all your might, that the music can bring them back. It only works if you believe it can. Look!

This is a game of make believe. One by one, they all join in (Figure 20).



Fig. 20: The flight of the passenger pigeon. With (from left) Derek Barton, Cameron Feagin, Omer Abbas Salem, Cheryl Roy, Brett Lee, Anu Bhatt, and Bill McGough.

DOUG

They flew out of the ground, from landfills.

DEREK

From chimneys and caves.

JULIE

Streamed out of sewer grates.

ESTER

12 came out of my closet.

MRS. WALLACE

Mine too!

DOUG

There was one in my shoe.

ESTER

The subway doors opened and out they flew!

Mrs. Wallace is dancing with Arlen. Julie and Doug join hands. Derek watches.

DOUG

They filled the sky.

DEREK

Just like Audubon said.

JULIE

The birds were still there.

The music ends. The disco ball goes out. One by one, they exit.

ARLEN

(sadly)

Three days later, still flying overhead.

Mrs. Wallace exits with Arlen. Derek is alone.

Taxus Floridana

Derek begins to tidy up and put things away. As he does so:

DEREK

So here's what happened. I've been out in Johnson's Juniper Swamp three times looking for the Florida Yew. Twice with my brother Sean. And once with my friend Trey. The going was so slow, we averaged a mile every two hours. We thought there was a road here, but couldn't find it.

(pause)

We found old railroad ties in there, probably from lumber trains. We also found cat-faces where turpentine had been harvested from old pines.

(pause)

We didn't find the Florida Yew. I know Trey has been out there since, looking for it. It may be out there, it may not. It's very likely that the swamp has been cut since 1927 for timber. It could have disturbed the habitat to the point that the yew couldn't survive there anymore. And besides that, I've decided that whether or not I find it, the thing that I was looking for was not what I thought it was initially.

(pause)

I really wanted to be able to go back to Arlen and tell him that I'd found it.

(pause, starts to exit, comes back)

I guess I need to say, too, that... I went looking for the old mobile home. My mother told me who bought it. I drove down to Telogia, turned down a bumpy road of yellow dirt. I was expecting to find it with other people's kids thrown out on the grass to play among anthills and rusty swing sets. But it wasn't there anymore. The woman across the road told me they'd left. She wiped her hands on her apron and shut the door. I walked around the empty lot and found oyster shells, a baby doll's arm, and a bucket with a rusted out bottom. When you lose something, do you just move on, or hold it in the heart a while. How do you know when you're done?

(pause)

I got back in my dad's old truck and headed home, turning right in Telogia, driving through Hosford's one blinking light, past Bristol, on my way back to Chicago.

Lights fade to SFX of bird wings/song.

END OF PLAY



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