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On Lyric Shame and Extinction

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ABSTRACT

According to a UN report published in 2019, up to one million species face extinction by 2100. Such a scale of loss outpaces language. Drawing on Denise Riley's work on the autonomy of language, this article argues that contemplating extinction involves attending to language's capacity to speak outside its context. Mindful of the 40% of amphibian life under threat of extinction, it examines three poems about frogs, by Paul Muldoon, Kathleen Jamie, and Vahni (Anthony Ezekiel) Capildeo, as instances of Riley's concept of 'lyric shame', where the poet acknowledges the 'voice of language itself . . . trying to speak'. Focusing on allusion, apostrophe, and ekphrasis (facets of the poem that involve a *clinamen*, a turn away from or towards the subject) it argues that the lyric poem – as an occasion where shame gives rise to song – can also be a vehicle for encountering the lament of long-neglected non-human voices.

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In April 2019, the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (or IPBES) issued a deeply troubling report on the rapid emptying of the world's ecosystems: 40% of amphibians, a third of reef-forming corals, and a third of marine mammals could disappear by the end of the century. In total, up to one million species face extinction (2019, 12). Without radical steps towards what it calls transformative change, the IPBES report predicts a thinner world, of quiet lands, silent skies and hushed oceans.

What can be said in the face of such a calamity? Or, more precisely, what can a poem say? Denise Riley has considered 'the act of contemplating words in demanding times' – times that are, she says, borrowing from Elias Canetti, 'swift, menacing, and rich' (2005, 1). Swift and menacing, surely; but it hardly seems appropriate to think of the brink of an extinction crisis as a time of richness. Yet it is precisely this capacity for language to surprise, to have its own say as Riley puts it, that interests me when it comes to the matter of poetry in the Anthropocene.

Among its many deprivations and strange changes, the Anthropocene is altering what we mean when we speak. As Rob Nixon has observed, "'glacial' – once a dead metaphor for 'slow' – [has become] a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss" (2011, 13). Increasingly, the seasons do not name what we expect them to. And when

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we consider the number of unknown species that fall under the shadow of the term 'extinction' (the IPBES report calculates that as many as three-quarters will become extinct before they can be identified), can we really say that we truly know what it means? The scale of the loss exceeds comprehension: a word whose finality ought to make its meaning wholly unambiguous becomes instead a referent for something that outpaces language entirely.

Perhaps in times like these, when the world no longer speaks back to us what we expect to hear,

we need to pay greater attention to what Riley calls 'the saying of language itself' (2005, 6). There is a 'feeling of dispossession', Riley writes, that arises from 'the gulf between the ostensible content of what's said, and the affect which seeps from the very form of the words'. According to Riley, we lack a vocabulary for 'this relative autonomy of language, or have let slip what vocabulary there once was'. This autonomy goes beyond 'unspoken implications', and asks us to reflect on 'how language as the voice of its occasion can also inflect its speakers' (2005, 2, 6, 2). 'There is,' Riley says, 'a dark quotidian poetics of ordinary language – saturated scenarios which from the onset exert their verbal violence, and entice to submission or shame'. Just as music can move regardless of who hears it, Riley suggests that 'there is a tangible affect in language which stands somewhat apart from the expressive intentions of an individual speaker; so language can work outside of its original context' (2005, 3, 5).

Riley's concern here is with social categories, and how gender, class or ethnicity are acts of ventriloquism, imprinted on the self from without and smuggled into what she calls 'the heart of a supposed inwardness'. This ventriloquism is a primary concern for the poet, whose inner speech constitutes, as Riley says, 'a swarm of quotations, often from anonymous and vanished others' (2004, 71); but, in the spirit of her expansive claim for language's capacity to work outside its original context, I want to suggest that these 'vanished others' also direct us to the allusive nature of extinction.

Extinction manifests principally as absence or silence. But it also registers allusively, as each individual death of a member of a threatened species gestures beyond itself to the greater loss confronting the species. Deborah Bird Rose calls this 'double death', where a single death is haunted by the many deaths, both past and foretold, that will lead to the end of the species. (2006, 75) Death is a precursor to life, both as an in-built cost of sexual reproduction and in the exchange of energy between predator and prey. '[L]iving things are bound into ecological communities of life and death', writes Rose, 'and further [...] these communities are fields of matter within which life is making and unmaking itself in time and place' (Rose 2006, 68). Extinction forecloses this plenitude. It only imagines a future emptied of promise. Extinction is therefore the total enclosure of time, the suturing of an open-ended flight way (Van Dooren 2016).

There is a further doubling that we need to take into account because the experience of loss we encounter in the face of double death is accompanied inevitably by a sense of the richness it replaces. Every death of a creature under the threat of extinction gestures simultaneously in two directions: to the onrushing future darkness, and back to the rich inheritance about to be squandered.

All of this is – or ought to be – a source of profound shame. Ronald Dworkin called extinction a 'cosmic shame' (1993, 75). But if so, shame before whom? Shame is an irreducibly relational condition, joined always to the presence of another (even if only

imagined) before whom we feel exposed. Drawing on the work of Sylvan Tomkins, Elspeth Probyn writes that shame is a consequence of being interested in others. To feel shame is to acknowledge connection, even if it marks the real or prospective break of that connection. In that sense, she writes, 'being shamed is not unlike being in love': shame is a response 'to the very possibility of love – either of oneself or of another' (2005, 2, 3).

'Being shamed' here refers to something very different than the experience of being publicly censured. Rather, it is an impulse that rises within us when we feel 'our interest' – that which connects us to the world – 'has been interfered with but not cancelled out' (2005, 15). Shame at an animal death that also calls to mind the spectre of species loss is an encounter with the richness of our menaced connection with the biosphere, where nothing reveals this connectedness more acutely than its (real or prospective) severance. Shame of this kind is not 'good', Probyn suggests, but rather productive in the Foucauldian sense because, even in the context of a profound loss, 'it adds rather than takes away' (2005, 15). Shame pointedly reminds us of our relation to other species.

This emphasis on connectedness links Probyn's concept of shame with Riley's notion of 'lyric shame'. 'Lyric shame', she says, 'is to do with being regarded as the source of the writing', when in fact the 'I' that speaks is, ultimately, a vacancy: merely marks a passing moment of individuation that dissolves at the poem's close in 'a swarm of quotations' (2018, 69; 2004, 58). Lyric shame is the revelation that the poet inhabits a live, speaking tradition – that of 'the voice of language itself [. . .] trying to speak' (2018, 69). This sense of shame is a necessary element in 'the impulse that produces lyric and breaks into song' (2018, 68). As Peter Riley reminds us, 'Song (actual, sung song) is collective. It is sent out into the world in search of auditors and to form or confirm a body of felt mutuality' (2016, np).

Inflecting Riley's lyric shame with Probyn's understanding of shame as an expression of our capacity to be interested in the world, I want to propose that the lyric poem, as the scene of language's 'saying of itself', can also help us negotiate the shifting, allusive domain of extinction. In the death of each member of an endangered species, there is a negotiation between closure and opening. Each alludes to the other, calling to mind diverging futures of richness and menace. Just as life's engine is the twin drives of *conatus* (becoming) and *orexis* (connection) (Rose 2006, 69), the open lyric is, as Lyn Hejinian tells us, 'open to the world' (2000, 43).

This matters because despite the gathering storm, richness still abounds in densely braided knots of multispecies relations. (Rose 2012) The characteristic dynamics of this entanglement, is the *clinamen*, the swerve that 'sets off a ceaseless chain of collisions', as Stephen Greenblatt puts it (2011, 7). Clinamen, or the swerve, is both an ecological principle and a poetic conceit. In the former case, all multicellular life is indebted to the swerve of symbiosis; to make kin, as Donna Haraway advocates (2016), is to incline towards another, relinquishing the illusion of the separate, bounded self for the startling reality of the self in community. I suggest that we can find frameworks for thinking about this in the swerves commonly enacted by the lyric poem; specifically, allusion, apostrophe, and ekphrasis.

Mindful of the 40% of amphibian life under threat of extinction, in what follows I examine three poems about frogs, by Paul Muldoon, Kathleen Jamie, and Vahni (Anthony Ezekiel) Capildeo, respectively. Each stage variations on poetry's strange saying that can help us to meet the demands of a time that is swift and menacing, as Canetti puts it, but also still rich in connections, embodiments, and becomings.

I

Paul Muldoon's 'The Frog' thinks about the animal as a problem of interpretation. In the poem, the speaker contemplates a frog that surprises him in the middle of a manual task by perching on his trowel.

The poem recalls the myth that the entire frog population in Ireland originated in a pair that bred in a pond in the gardens of Trinity College ('Two bottles of wine left there to chill/after the Act of Union') (1996, 76). The allusions in Muldoon's poem are couched in tall tales that conflate natural and national history. In *Topographica Hibernica*, the twelfth-century monk Giraldus Cambrensis tells of the recent discovery of a frog 'in a grassy meadow near Waterford'. The animal – which he insists has never been seen in Ireland before ('there are neither snakes, nor adders, toads nor frogs, tortoises or scorpions, nor dragons' in Ireland, Giraldus affirms) – is brought to the court of the warden of the country, where the king of Ossory, Duvenold, pronounces it an omen foretelling the coming of the English (2000, 28). But rather than relating it directly, Muldoon folds this story within a less well-known amphibian anecdote, of a Fellow of Trinity College Dublin who brought English frogs to Dublin in 1696, shifting this second referent forward by just over 100 years so that it coincides with the merging of the parliaments of Great Britain and Ireland. (1964) Allusion is enclosed within allusion.

Muldoon's speaker is similarly unsure whether the poem's eponymous frog may be said to mean anything beyond itself:

There is, surely, in this story
a moral. A moral for our times.
What if I put him to my head
and squeezed it out of him,
like the juice of freshly squeezed limes,
or a lemon sorbet? (1996, 86)

For Muldoon, the 'moral for our times' lies outside the poet's resources; instead, he must 'extract' it, as it were, from elsewhere. Sources become muddied, and truth-telling destructive (albeit ironically citrus-scented); 'The Frog', Edna Longley writes, "sabotage[s] all kinds of certainty about how 'far' we 'know' into the past or future" (1994, 169).

The rubble that Muldoon's urban pastoral inhabits, then, is 'the nightmare of history'; and yet such a richly allusive work might also be said to express a further anxiety as well. Muldoon's poem concedes that it inhabits an insecure, shifting terrain – that to know the poem (and the individual animal) we need to look beyond it. Allusion raises questions about the origins of intention and meaning. Susan Stewart writes that 'in allusion we seek to follow the trace of the event', and yet this origin always eludes us because 'the allusive object attracts and points beyond itself; it *bursts with an overabundance of signification*, a signification that contrives [...] to connote more than it can possibly connote' (1980,

1128, 1129. My emphasis). Allusion is a system of reference organised around loss (the loss of the original context, the ‘ecosystem’ of the object), but marked by excess (the excess of new contexts and connections created by the reader). This collusion of absence and excess is the root of Denise Riley’s idea of lyric shame. Any poetic ‘I’ – especially one as playful as that which typically anchors a Muldoon poem – is simply a temporary coherence in space-time; a brief moment of speaking, as Riley puts it, ‘from one place [that] is simultaneously everyone’s everywhere’ (2000, 57). Which is to say that, if I – knowing, as Muldoon did not in 1983, that close to half of amphibians could become extinct – put the frog to my head, and squeeze, what bursts out may far exceed whatever intention initially enclosed the poem.

The story of the origin of frogs in Ireland, alluded to in Muldoon’s poem, is, in fact, a deep time story. For a long time, it was assumed that frogs arrived on the island only after the retreat of the ice sheets that once smothered Northern Europe, travelling across a now-submerged land bridge from Britain or re-introduced by humans following trade routes from Iberia up to 2,000 years ago (Giraldus also surmises that his frog arrived ‘by accident in a ship from some neighbouring port’). But a recent study has established that Irish frogs have a genetic heritage distinct from that of frogs in the rest of Western Europe, and that the separation of lineages can be traced back to the last common ancestor alive 700,000 years ago. The present common frog population is thought to have descended from a small population that found refuge in an unglaciated area in south-west Ireland (Teacher, Garner, and Nichols 2009). What bursts forth, then, in the excess of signification that is characteristic of allusion, is the richness of what Deborah Bird Rose calls ‘ethical time’ – the long history of generations bequeathing life to generations through which individuals become species. (Rose 2012) The peculiarly allusive present of Muldoon’s ‘The Frog’ is thickened by the deep past, reaching back through the millennia of genetic gifting that has produced the creature perched on his trowel.

Countless frog generations echo through ‘The Frog’, populating the poem with innumerable ‘vanished others’. But torqued by the knowledge of how thin the world to come could be, the poem also echoes with warnings of what is to come. As the circle of allusion expands, the poem conjures what Jonathan Skinner calls an ‘acoustic ecology’, a site for cross-species resonances. Resonance is a means, he argues, ‘for communication to happen without consciousness’, and thus an ‘opening for communication between species’ (2017, 170). Of course, Muldoon’s frog is silent, but resonance as Skinner defines it does not entail a kind of buried mimetic, a multi-species ventriloquism smuggled into the poem’s soundscape. Rather, what resonates in the poem is a caution. The frog’s ‘small upheaval’, Longley suggests, ‘implies a negative capability’ (1994, 168), and throughout each stanza, from the ‘small upheaval’ of the first line, to the sought-for ‘moral’, and the ‘freshly squeezed lime’ and ‘lemon sorbet’ of its close, the poem is populated by a host of pealing ‘I’ sounds. This is most evident in the first stanza, where each end-rhyme rings with the same consonant – *rubble, bubble, level, chisel, trowel* – resonating with the dire warning offered by Duvenold in Giraldus’ account, whose omen predicts that the frog will be ‘the bearer of doleful news for Ireland’ (2000, 28).

Although nowadays Irish common frogs are not at risk, in 2010 the National Frog Survey observed that the loss of habitat to agricultural intensification and other development pressures were key threats to frog populations, and other amphibians – such as the

natterjack toad – are endangered. (Reid et al. 2013) We might notice, too, the punning effect of the doubled, ‘a moral. A moral’, in the final stanza. This doleful resonance that echoes throughout the poem opens a space for communicating an amphibian dilemma.

This is where lyric shame can move us to a different form of relation. Part of lyric shame lies in the persistence of song, the pain of ‘making a noise that must become bearable’ even when the times themselves are anything but. Yet the value of this ‘singing in distress’ is in leading us to what Riley calls ‘an acknowledged sorrow’. Where shame is irrational, a response to the poem as an excess of voices, sorrow for Riley is an entirely rational response to ‘the state of the world’ (2018, 71, 72). Read in these particular unbearable times, Muldoon’s ‘The Frog’ shows how the echoes that populate the lyric poem include ‘voices’ we need to urgently learn to hear better. It therefore offers the first move in a *clinamen* for us as readers, a swerve from an inward-looking shame at the scandal of extinction, to an outward-facing sorrow.

II

To follow the arc of the swerve, we need to turn to Kathleen Jamie’s poem ‘Frogs’, from *The Tree House* (2004), which – as the speaker contemplates two frogs killed in the act of mating by a passing car – also explores the performance of an ‘acknowledged sorrow’. Jamie cultivates a multispecies affinity in the initial stanzas through intimate attention to texture and pattern, peering closely at the female’s back ‘mottled to leafy brown’, the male’s ‘marked with two stripes/pale as over-wintered grass’ (2004, 5). This act of concentration brings poetry close to a form of sacrament. “Isn’t that a kind of prayer?” Jamie writes in her essay collection *Findings*. ‘The care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, the paying heed?’ (2005, 109).

Nonetheless, it also stages a turn from lyric shame to an expression of acknowledged sorrow with the devastating interruption of ‘The car//that would smear them/into one’ (2004, 6). Emphasised by the enjambment across the stanza break, the car is a radical rupture of the quiet attentiveness that has marked the poem to this point, the scene of reproduction giving way suddenly to one of the death. The ironised union – ‘belly/to belly’ – might perhaps recall Muldoon’s squeezed frog, but the unheeding vehicle that crushes Jamie’s frogs in its wake actually alludes to a very different, and older poem, Christina Rossetti’s ‘A Frog’s Fate’, in which an anthropomorphised ‘large-souled Frog’ is run down by ‘a broad-wheeled waggon unawares.’ (1990, 51) Consider the final stanza of each poem side by side:

O rich and poor, O great and small,
Such oversights beset us all.
The mangled Frog abides incog,
The uninteresting actual frog:
The hypothetic frog alone
Is the one frog we dwell upon. (1990, 52)

Oh how we press on —
the car and passengers, the slow
creatures of this earth,
the woman by the verge
with her hands cupped. (2004, 6)

The apostrophe 'Oh' at the head of Jamie's last stanza implicitly invokes the 'O' of Rossetti's, from 1885 – a time long before the motor car, but when 'broad-wheeled' modernity could be no less heedlessly devastating. Although Jamie's animals are silent and withdrawn (in contrast with Rossetti, who gives her frog a voice with which to eulogise his own passing), she takes seriously the injunction to pay attention to 'The uninteresting actual frog', even when its own attention, held to a 'bog-dull/imperative' in the act of mating, swerves widely away from her. (2004, 5)

Between these two apostrophes – Rossetti's 'O' and Jamie's 'Oh', which echo one another – we might detect the figure of Echo herself, or at least Riley's account of Echo as a figure for 'the troubled nature of lyric poetry'. Repetition and echo are the real materiality of language, she says, yet 'repetition is never an inert affair'. Rather, Echo's apparent passivity, unable to do anything other than repeat what is said through her, possesses its own 'strong agency'. While Echo does re-present sound in a very literal way, 'what she presents back', Riley insists, 'is no longer the original utterance. The word, now as thing, is wrenched into a novel sense or nonsense' (2000, 11, 158, 157). What makes the repeated word or sound strange is that it carries with it a new sense of time:

There's a strange *time* of rhyme. [...] You anticipate the rhyme's arrival, but you hear it in retrospect; aurally, it works forwards and backwards, although on the page you can see it coming. [...] This eccentric temporality, this time of rhyme in its strange undecidability is an instance of retrospective knowledge. (2000, 71)

'Anticipation lives in prosody', Riley insists (2000, 159). In the 'retrospective knowledge' offered by rhyme, we feel we knew it – the rhyme – all along. We heard it coming. J.H. Prynne makes a similar point when he argues that in poetic language we 'hear in older sounds the then new sounds of making and unmaking a track into forward space: a future in the past'. (2010, 133). This strange time of rhyme hangs over Muldoon's work, full of eccentric half- or quarter-rhymes, and where the acoustic ecology resonates with the 'vanished others' of the deep past and the deep future. But the anticipation of rhyme also signals something of the curious time of ecological elegy. An elegy such as Thomas Hardy's 'The Voice' performs a kind of acoustic resurrection: the speaker declares their grief, which the landscape then speaks back, aurally restoring the lost to a facsimile of voice. ('Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me', Hardy 1993, 74) Ecological elegy refuses this antiphonal catharsis. Instead, its echoes resonate with an awareness of losses yet to arrive.

Ecological elegies therefore perform what critics such as Bonnie Costello and Clifton Spargo have called an act of 'anticipatory mourning': mourning for something not yet completely passed, for a loss that is both here and to come (Spargo 2004; Costello 2010). But in keeping with a poem whose orientation is so open, by rhyming her 'Oh' with Rossetti's 'O' Jamie extends this 'strange time of rhyme' *within* the poem to the relations *between* poems and, crucially, between animal deaths more than a century apart. In the context of deep time, a hundred years is the blink of an eye, but this fatal rhyming of animal deaths resonates instead with the strange time of the extinction crisis, in which individual animal deaths take on a kind of spectrality or doubled vision. When looking at the isolated death of an animal whose species is threatened by human activity, we can also, in a sense, glimpse the greater shadow that will fall when the last animal dies.

Jamie's 'Oh' therefore becomes a future-oriented lament, one that takes in not just the deaths of a particular pair of amphibians, but also Rose's 'double death', where the death of the individual animal is ghosted by the onrushing loss of an entire lineage. Her apostrophe turns outwards, drawing in a sense of the planetary (in 'the slow/creatures of this earth'), of ruptured flightways and thus of losses yet to occur. (Jamie 2004, 6)

In doing so, she invites us to contemplate the value of turning aside, cultivating a different quality of attentiveness linked to Probyn's understanding of shame as the ability to be interested in the world. Shame, Probyn says, 'makes us question again the relationship between what we understand by the particular . . . and the general' (2005, 16). The woman's silent gesture acknowledges the roadside as a scene of double death, her cupped hands (both full and empty) alluding to the richness that loss alerts us to. Her stance, like a further, embodied 'o' offered up to what may come, demonstrates that attention can be both future-oriented and a form of prayer (another context in which language may be said to insist upon its own saying).

III

Paul Muldoon's 'The Frog' and Kathleen Jamie's 'Frogs', offer examples of *clinamen* as a swerve towards acknowledging how the richness of our multispecies connection is menaced by the swiftness of extinction. In Vahni (Anthony Ezekiel) Capildeo's 'Latona and Her Children' (a story that also crops up on several occasions in Muldoon's work), we find a third and final example of kin-making organised around the swerve of *clinamen*. But where Muldoon and Jamie explore allusion and apostrophe, 'Latona . . .' is an *ekphrasis*, responding to a seventeenth-century Dutch tapestry depicting a scene from the myth of Latona, or Leto as she appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's telling, she is seduced by Jupiter and conceives twins (Artemis and Apollo), and as punishment is made by Juno to wander the earth without refuge, 'debarred from settling anywhere in the world'. Her exile continues after she gives birth, and one day, under a blazing sun, she arrives with her children by a lake in the land of the Lycians. She seeks permission from the Lycian men working the shoreline to drink from the lake, and to give water to her children, but they refuse to take pity on her, and even maliciously stir up the muddy bottom with their feet. Outraged, Latona pronounces a curse on their inhospitality – 'live forever in that lake of yours, then!' – and turns the men into frogs (Ovid 1982, 144).

As a form of *clinamen*, *ekphrasis* encloses a number of swerves: like apostrophe, it performs a turn towards an object; as in allusion, it rewrites another artwork on its own terms. It also poses a particular temporal relation: that of the stilled scene. The archetypal Romantic *ekphrasis* is, of course, Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which rhapsodises 'silence and slow time'. Capildeo, however, shows how *ekphrasis* may allow us to think 'slow time' together with the urgency of extinction:

This tapestry's in sympathy
with wives who have been wronged
in gorgeous-feeling houses
where rage bindweeds into rugs.
You could lay your cheek against this
woolly silky rosy thread,
smug in a censored village

where the frogs have been erased. (2018, 29)

The opening lines position this as a poem in search of affinity: art is a form of kin-making, Capildeo affirms, a means of inclining beyond singular experience. The maltreated Latona is, of course, the primary focus of sympathy, but Capildeo's prefatory note, that in making the tapestry, 'the heads of men were woven as frogs and then altered to human', also introduces a rather ambivalent sense of multispecies relations. For one, it inverts the metamorphosis, changing frogs to men rather than men to frogs, introducing a ghostly sense of kinship. The human genome shares around 1,700 genes with the genome of the African clawed frog, and many common elements of structure – structures that were present 360 million years ago, in the last common ancestor of all mammals, amphibians, and birds alive today. (Hellsten et al. 2010) Prefaced by this creaturely haunting, we enter the poem aware that we, like all species, are what Rose calls densely woven knots of embodied time.

The inversion (frogs to men rather than men to frogs) initiates a series of swerves that undo the neat justice of the Ovidian myth. The erased frogs in the first stanza turn towards the 'erased' Latona, wandering in exile in the second; the 'bastard fruit' she carries in her womb turns towards the final stanza, which is preoccupied by the Dutch weavers' decision to enclose the scene of abuse in a vision of bucolic calm, surrounded by 'green, without drama' (Capildeo 2018, 29). The frame transmutes the violence of the myth into the violence of enclosure, and the forcible exclusion, like that of Latona, of nature as the outside of human experience.

Capildeo's swerves show us that the malice of the Lycians begins in their destructive attitudes towards their environment, as no more than a resource to be exploited or withheld. In turning attention to what frames the scene, however, Capildeo also looks beyond it, laying the poem open to other times and places that torque the myth into an Anthropocene context. The 'reassuring woodland décor' also hints at 'signs of Artemis to come', and this intimation that another kind of relation with the natural world is possible prompts us towards a final turn: to look back to the animal of its opening stanza, and to the fast-and-slow-time-together of extinction – back, that is, to the 'censored village/ where the frogs have been erased' (2018, 29).

Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* opens with a visit to El Valle de Antón, a town in Panama that, in 2006, lost virtually its entire population of golden tree frogs in an outbreak of a deadly chytrid fungus, *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*, or *Bd*. (2014) *Bd* is responsible for the extinction of around ninety frog species since the 1970s, along with serious decline in around another five hundred amphibian species; a quarter have lost more than 90% of their population. (Stockstad 2019)

Like Leto searching for a place to rest, *Bd* has found a home on six continents in a matter of decades. There are other peculiar parallels, other swerves between myth and reality. The chytrid fungus itself causes the animals' skin to harden and slough off (echoing, perhaps, Muldoon's squeezed frog), and preventing them – like the Lycians with Leto and her children – from taking in fluids. One key early driver in the spread of *Bd* was the use of African clawed frogs in the mid-twentieth century pregnancy tests. In 1934, South African researchers discovered that if they injected the urine of a pregnant woman into a female clawed frog, the frog would release eggs within twenty-four hours. When the technique was at its peak, more than ten thousand frogs were exported worldwide

annually, creating a spurious link between clawed frogs and “an ‘out-of-Africa’ hypothesis of disease emergence that repeated tired colonial tropes about the ‘diseased continent’” (Kirksey et al. 2016, 39).

In fact, *Bd* emerged in the Korean peninsula sometime in the 1950s and, coeval with other symptoms of the Anthropocene, spread rapidly worldwide. International shipping, the mass transit of soldiers during the Korean War, and the global trade in amphibians as pets have introduced *Bd* to Australia, North, South, and Central America, the Caribbean, and the Iberian Peninsula in a matter of decades. Kolbert notes that frogs evolved ‘at a time when all the land on earth was part of one large mass’ – the Pangaea supercontinent – a geologic reality of the deep past effectively reconstituted by global trade: biologists refer to contemporary trade networks as ‘a functional Pangaea for infectious diseases in wildlife’ (Kolbert 2014, 11; Scheele et al. 2019, 1461).

As it frames the resurgence of the very deep, geologic past, Capildeo’s poem also inclines towards the emptiness of the deep future that would follow a full-scale extinction. There is currently no viable cure for *Bd* in wild frog populations, which continue to decline alarmingly; the finality of extinction embeds a deep irony in Latona’s curse on the Lycians, to ‘live forever in that lake of yours’. And the poem is not silent about this. Although erased, the frogs nonetheless populate the poem’s soundscape, in the many ‘g’ sounds—*wronged*; *gorgeous*; *rugs*; *smug*; glanced at too in *village* and most pertinently in *rage* – that cluster in the first stanza. Language, again, having its say: rage is bound into this tapestry, not just the wrath of maltreated Latona but the grievous wrong of extinction as well. As Capildeo’s *ekphrastic* poem swerves away from the tapestry’s frame and inclines towards the animal hidden in the weave, the ‘dark quotidian poetics of language’ inflect the scene of Leto’s abuse with an acknowledged sorrow that also takes in the immense slow time of evolution and the devastatingly fast time of species loss. (Riley 2005, 3)

The ‘saying of language itself’ urges us to turn back towards life, and to see that our responsibility in the Anthropocene is to cultivate collaborative rather than exploitative relations with other species. The frog poems of Paul Muldoon, Kathleen Jamie, and Vahni (Anthony Ezekiel) Capildeo show how, in a time when our intended meaning can be so distorted by the world that language speaks back to us, the poem can be a vehicle for listening to long-neglected, non-human voices.

It is often said that we need new art that can account for the emergency we face. This is true, but we also need to learn to read in new ways the art already given to us; not to impose alien meaning, or force the work into novel shapes, but to find the connections and affinities that were always there, despite our determination to ignore them. What we hear when we incline towards the poem may not be comforting, beset instead by shame, sorrow or even rage. But we should not, and cannot afford to be deterred, both for the sake of the named life we know is ebbing away, and also for those ‘shy beast[s]/who,’ as Muldoon puts it in ‘Quoof’, ‘ha[ve] yet to enter the language’ (1996, 73).

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