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# Animal Elegy in Ron Rash's "In the Valley" (2020)

Frédérique Spill

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- 1 Published in 2020, *In the Valley* is Ron Rash's seventh collection of short stories, his first collection of new stories since the 2013 publication of *Nothing Gold Can Stay*.<sup>1</sup> The volume is dedicated to his first grandson, Collins Lee Rash. The title story is Rash's first attempt at writing a novella, which, as announced on the cover page of the Doubleday original hardcover edition, is "based on the *New York Time* bestseller *Serena*." But strikingly enough, the fierce eponymous character of Rash's 2008 novel now looms in the background of the narrative. In the process, running counter to his readers' expectations, Rash puts some of the initial novel's surviving secondary characters in the limelight; he also centers the narrative of "In the Valley" on the valley proper. Indeed, while taking up some of the loose threads of *Serena*, "In the Valley" is above all a step by step portrayal of a dying ecosystem. While the text displays how the animals that were at home in the valley are expelled from it, as the place no longer allows them to find shelter and sustenance, the representation of trees similarly registers the agony of a whole ecosystem. In this respect, "In the Valley" deals, in its own way, with "the era of the earth's great unraveling" (Soper 747). Though set in the 1930s, the novella speaks to contemporary environmental issues: it confirms Ron Rash's sharp environmental consciousness, along other contemporary American writers like his friend Rick Bass. Together with Barbara Kingsolver or Ann Patchett, Rash's fictional and poetic work forcefully represents the long-term economic and social impact of the environmental crisis on the Appalachian Mountains and the often irreversible damage it engenders. In the company of his peers, Rash offers narratives that emphasize the *sympoiesis* at work in the living world, the overall resistance to "wordling-with, in company" (Haraway 58)<sup>2</sup>, and the devastating consequences of that shortsightedness.
- 2 While trees are decimated throughout "In the Valley" and their disappearance uncovers a wasteland, several of the novella's sections conclude with italicized paragraphs that poetically inventory the successive departures of the many species whose habitat has been irremediably threatened by the blows of axes, felled trees and

denuded mountain slopes. This is not the first expression of Rash's concern with endangered species, but it is certainly the most powerful.<sup>3</sup> Though it originally refers to a meditative lyric poem lamenting the death of a public personage or of a friend or loved one, the term elegy has, by extension, come to designate any reflective lyric piece of writing on the broader theme of human mortality. Our contention is that, with its juxtaposition of two modes of writing that equally partake of his remarkable poetic prose, Rash's "In the Valley" extends the use of elegy to nonhuman mortality, the nonhuman encompassing "animal, vegetal, and mineral bodies as well as ecologies" (Pearsall 236).

- 3 In this paper we will argue that Rash's return to Serena's destructive frenzy operates as a pretext for him to deal, in his own poetic way, with the devastating consequences of such a ruthless exploitative behavior and their lethal contribution to the sixth extinction which, according to paleontologists like Michael Novacek, designates "the greatest wave of extinctions seen since the sudden demise of dinosaurs" (Pearson 129). We will demonstrate that "In the Valley" partakes of the genre of the poetry of extinction, which "is characterized more than anything else by an overwhelming sense of emptiness and irreversible loss, global in scope, at humans' annihilation of wild nature, and [...] tends to view each species being eradicated as equally important to a multi-species Earth as the human species itself" (Pearson 130). Focusing on the diverse ways in which the valley's inexorable emptying is represented, we will therefore read "In the Valley" as an animal elegy that poetically represents the inexorable extinction of numerous species. We will first examine the narrative's strategy of decentering in comparison with *Serena*. Secondly, focusing on the trees, the eagle and the serpent, we will observe the representations of nonhuman species, which take precedence in "In the Valley"—of their life and death. Our last section will be devoted to the poetics of exhaustion that underlies the novella.

## Decentering Serena, Placing the valley center stage

- 4 "In the Valley" is situated at the end of the eponymous collection though the motif of the valley recurs throughout the stories and, in typical Rash fashion, across times and places. In the final novella, the valley appears at large, as a cradle for all its earlier occurrences and for the more or less explicit intimations of mortality contained in all the preceding stories. "In the Valley" is also undoubtedly the story in the collection that is most likely to draw the attention of Rash's readers, not only because it is the last and longest story in the book, but mostly because it fulfils the writer's unlikely decision to write a prequel to his best-selling 2008 novel, *Serena*, whose eponymous character he has often admitted he found particularly haunting. To do so, he went back prior to *Serena*'s coda, which depicts her and Galloway's vengeful murders and deaths in Brazil, decades after Serena has become the unchallenged lumber empress of the place. Going back to July 1931 (128), just a year after her husband Pemberton's death (at her own hand), Rash therefore revived his two most notorious villains, fleshing out Serena with even more lethal ambition and Galloway with new deeds of an unspeakable violence, and, in passing, endowing him with a past.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, two of the sixteen numbered sections making up "In the Valley," most of which (eleven, to be accurate) are devoted to the chronological narration, take the form of analepses that densify the characterizations of secondary characters whose existences in *Serena* were reduced to

the present.<sup>5</sup> In the process, the reader is allowed to catch a glimpse of Galloway's childhood in section 5, which relates his experience of a traveling fairground and his budding taste for cruelty, his frustration not to be allowed to quench it and his first and only attempt to lie to his mother. In similar fashion though taking a broader perspective, section 9 covers several decades of Ross's childhood, youth and early adult life, accounting for the tragic reason why a clever man like him, promised to a bright future, ended up as a bitterly angry logger.

- 5 This narrative choice well exemplifies the modalities of Rash's return to *Serena*: beyond the unnumbered opening of the novella, which somehow echoes *Serena*'s unnumbered coda, placing her center stage, young again and animated with her characteristic hunger for power—the section concludes with her assertion that her quest will be over “[w]hen the world and my will are one” (130)—, *Serena* is literally decentered from the story, which no longer exclusively is her own. As a result, former secondary characters like Galloway and his mother, as well as Snipes and his crew, become central to the novella's plot.<sup>6</sup> When *Serena* actually appears in “In the Valley,” she always does so, either up close or at a distance, in the eyes of an identified beholder, thus becoming the object of musing gazes rather than the main subject of the narrative. For instance, one of the purposes of section 2 is to portray *Serena* through the eyes of a man, Boston businessman Brandonkamp, who has never met her, yet who is familiar with her reputation (140). The whole section indeed relates Brandonkamp's first visit to the camp and encounter with *Serena*. He operates as a focalizer, as a result of which the valley, the camp, then the lady of the place, are successively depicted through his eyes:

The valley floor was, except for a pasture, a welter of stumps and slash and mud, the ridges the same except for a portion of the east-facing flank. The unlogged portion appeared formidable, steep-graded and thick-timbered (139).

- 6 This early description of the valley through a foreigner's eyes allows the reader to take stock of the situation: as the story starts, the valley already is a scene of utter desolation, whose deadliness is somehow enhanced by the presence of a last square of green—the pasture incidentally mentioned in an aside. As a consequence of months of logging, the dense heights of greenness have been reduced to “a welter of stumps and slash and mud,” the abandoned limbs of whole forests on a scene that is reminiscent of a muddy battleground. This description of the valley is fraught with bitter irony as the vision of the vast “unlogged portion” in the second part of the quote gives Brandonkamp confidence that *Serena* will fail to meet the three-day deadline that actually corresponds to the duration of the plot: “Mud clung to his alligator shoes and pant cuffs, but a small price for confirmation that, as he'd expected after such a hard winter and rainy spring, the deadline wouldn't be met” (140).
- 7 As with *Serena*, the broader context of “In the Valley” is that of the 1929 financial crisis; the narrator drops several allusions to its lasting effects: “‘More banks is closed,’ Snipes said. ‘Poor folks is getting poorer’” (145), and to the world of crime, as “Capone is heading to the hoosegow now” (145). Section 1 provides the reader with elements of local contextualization, making it clear that, before she departed for Brazil nine months earlier, “shortly after her husband's death,” the “7,000-acre tract” *Serena* left in the hands of “the bookkeeper Meeks with instructions that the job be finished by midnight on the last day of July” was “the last of her North American holdings.” In the present of narration, she, therefore, merely comes back for a few days to see to the completion of the deal: “Now it was July 28 and she had returned” (131). That *Serena*

(still) is as "formidable," as Brandonkamp finds out in section 2, as the "steep-graded and thick-timbered" "unlogged portion" that she is expected to have logged in the space of three days for her to emerge victorious of that last North American venture, is suggested by the solemn simplicity of the clause "she had returned": her physical presence alone engenders a sense of awe. It is further enhanced by Meeks' grammatical demotion for failing Serena through the repeated use of the pluperfect: "Horse, eagle, and rider disappeared into an outbuilding that *had* previously *served* as a garage for Meeks's Pierce-Arrow," while a steamer trunk is hauled to "the two-bedroom A-frame that *had served* as Meeks' living quarters" (131; my emphasis). Before he is literally eliminated, Meeks is humiliatingly deprived of the space he was allowed to occupy as the camp's overseer, which understandably prompts his attempt to leave the camp unnoticed in the middle of the night.<sup>7</sup> Marking the novella's entrance into genuine southern gothic mood, section 4, which takes place in the densest darkness, describes almost step by step Meeks' attempted escape from the "ogre" (155), Galloway, whom Serena sends after him, down to his tragic end, which makes him Serena's first new victim, thus adding up to the innumerable murders scattering the earlier novel. But before Meeks' "neck bone snap[s]" (159), the narrator endows him with a brief moment of awareness that strikingly replaces his actual pursuers, Galloway and Serena herself, with an abstract sense of poetic justice:

Keeping low, he moved into a wasteland leveled by ax and saw. Last November, he'd smoked a Partagas cigar as the tract's last tree fell, but the same denuded landscape he'd celebrated was now exacting its revenge. The land shadowless, moonlight fell full upon his hunched form. Yet bright as the moon shown, the stumps and slash blended with the ground. Every few steps he fell, got up, and fell again. (157)

- 8 Though by then Meeks has spotted his pursuers, he identifies his impending doom with the land he has contributed to "level[ing]" and "denud[ing]," thus endowing it with agency and the ability to perform an act of vengeful and, Meeks seems to believe, deserved retaliation. While the density of the night is devoid of shadows, since trees have been reduced to "stumps and slash blendin[ing] with the ground" into a monochrome of blackness, Meeks' own shadow, the only one, makes his hunched, stumbling form, obviously defeated already, all the more conspicuous—an easy prey for the agents of night. Though it may pass unnoticed, the way human agents are superseded by nonhuman elements in Meeks' last guilt-ridden thought somehow confirms Rash's decentering narrative strategy in "In the Valley."
- 9 Throughout the novella, both Serena and the valley are successively observed through the eyes of several focalizers. But, while taking up things where Serena left them before her first move to Brazil, "In the Valley" focuses, in lieu of her, on the world and individuals which gravitated around her in the novel and which, as a result, were mostly subservient to her. As pointed out by the shift in titles from character to place, the novella's attention is directed at the place, the workers, their lives, and at the dramatic long-term consequences of Serena's ruthless exploitation of the mountain slopes.

## Representations of nonhuman life and death in the valley: the trees, the eagle and the serpent

10 While the main protagonists of *Serena* tend to recede in the background of "In the Valley," the distant third-person narrator draws the reader's attention to other forms of life in the valley—nonhuman forms of life. The novella's elegiac tone derives from the fact that, more often than not, representations of nonhuman life are capturing the very moment when life is brought to an end, when decade-old trees are felled, when animals are forced to depart towards a more than uncertain future.

11 As in *Serena*, depictions of trees are key to the evocation of the scenery in the novella, as much as they are central to the plot, whose tension lies in the seemingly impossible challenge of logging an entire, particularly steep, slope in just three days. Once again, instead of being simply judgmental and reproofing, Rash places his narrator in a difficult position from which he acknowledges irreconcilable perspectives, as the loggers' lament at the demise of a whole ecosystem, to which they are forced to participate, goes hand in hand with their urge to meet the deadline—hence to cut more trees—for them to cash their checks and make a living.<sup>8</sup> In the process, they embody the terrible paradox that has engendered so many massive irreversible natural destructions: making a living takes a killing. "In the Valley" well portrays the loggers' ambivalence towards trees, as in the next example, taken from the end of section 1:

The saw's teeth raked across the trunk seven more times before the tulip poplar began to tremble. Snipes and Henryson pulled out the saw and yelled 'timber.' The tree creaked and tottered, then paused as if the ridge that held it upright for over a century might yet anchor it. A last loud crackling and the tulip poplar crashed earthward. (136-37)

12 The scene displays the loggers' expert routine, first the forceful saw movements that forever threaten the tree's anchorage, then the warning cry, which is also a victory cry, to protect their coworkers. Number seven and the phrase "seven more" are strongly redolent of the narrative of The Great Deluge in Genesis: 7, which, as we will see, constitutes one of the main intertexts of the novella. Meanwhile, the verb "anchor" simultaneously evokes a sense of rootedness and sea imagery. The tulip tree's century-long lifetime upright on the ridge is quite dramatically opposed to the crackling and the crashing of its almost instantaneous fall—the ponderous sound upon which the section significantly concludes, silencing all voices and other noises.

13 The following scene, taken from section 7, similarly conveys the loggers' ambivalent sense of awe toward the trees they are hired to defeat:

Yesterday, Snipes and Henryson had felled a sugar maple and a white oak, clearing space to begin sawing one of the largest trees in the valley, a chestnut so wide three men could not have linked arms around it. Henryson stared at the tree and shook his head.

'I get blisters just looking at that thing.'

'It is right sizable, but it's dying of the blight,' Snipes said, pointing to an orange fungus on the bark, 'which makes me feel a bit less bad to cut it. There was some winter chestnuts was near all that kept me and my family's bellies filled.'

[...]

The men resumed work. Trees began to fall. Some could hardly be heard, the sound

little more than the thrash and scrape of sheared limbs. But the bigger trees, the oaks and poplars and hickories, made the whole ridge shake. (174)

- 14 This passage is fraught with significance: it first gives the reader a vivid sense of the height and width of trees that were then to be found in the Appalachian Mountains, their immensity making the men that are instrumental to their fall look diminutive and puny. Such creatures inspire awe. The blisters Henryson imagines “just looking” at the chestnut tree alludes to the difficulty of the loggers’ task, even more so when faced with such “sizable” trees, whose cutting implies preparatory work, “clearing space.” The conversation between the two loggers also hints at a widespread disease that produced significant damage in the area: the chestnut blight. It was caused by a parasitic fungus of chestnut trees naturally found in South East Asia, which was accidentally introduced in North America and Europe, leading to invasive populations of *C. parasitica*. The fungal disease, which, as noted by Snipes, is characterized by its orange coloring, had a particularly devastating economic and social impact on communities in the eastern United States. It is estimated that in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it killed four billion trees (Roane), thus making the already precarious survival of whole families all the more problematic. Throughout his work, Rash repeatedly refers to the chestnut blight, whose effects are already repertoried in *The Cove* (2012), whose plot takes place around World War One.<sup>9</sup> Its recurrence in “In the Valley” points to the long-term effects of the disease (see Fisher); it also highlights the fact that the decline of certain tree essences has other causes besides logging. Anyhow, the accumulation of “sheared limbs” constitutes an excruciating scenery: as at the end of section 1, the falling trees, either trashing, merely scarping or shaking “the whole ridge,” sing their last plaintive tune.
- 15 Throughout “In the valley,” Rash carefully arranged the representations of trees according to their successive disappearances, starting with lower-elevation trees (sycamores, sweetgum) at the beginning of the story, then shifting to other trees like poplar and oak at rising elevations, as in the previous scene. Logically, the highest elevation trees, which happen to be firs, are to be found at the end of the novella when the loggers eventually reach the top of the ridge. Several passages demonstrate the latter’s awareness of the fact that tree essences change with altitude, and so does their job:
- Snipes pointed up the ridge where the fog had begun to lighten. Just visible through the mist, a smidge of green appeared amid the hardwood trunks.  
‘Please tell me that ain’t just some rhododendron,’ Henryson said.  
‘It’s a fir,’ Snipes said. ‘We’re getting near the top.’ (193)
- 16 In section 10, the loggers are about to reach the highest tract of uncut trees. Henryson’s exhaustion and eagerness to be done with the job are projected upon his perception of the trees. While his reluctant identification of “the smidge of green” ahead of them with “just some rhododendron” is quite dispiriting as far as the progress of their task goes, Snipe’s corrective remarks that “It’s a fir” is fraught with a paradoxical sense of hope: once at the top, the men will have completed their chore and be allowed to rest. Their having reached that point also implies that the slope will be entirely denuded by then, uncovering yet another tract of wasteland.
- 17 Representations of animal life in “In the Valley” are of various significant kinds: appearances of individual creatures are, indeed, to be distinguished from Rash’s references to entire species in the form of pluralized inventories that foresee “the global destruction of biodiversity” (Pearson 135) and put our “confrontation with

global loss" (Heise 61) at the core of the narrative. Again, both characters' and readers' responses, this time to animal life, are ambivalent: while most individualized animals are somehow depicted as threatening to human life, their appearances in groups elicit an entirely different reaction as they implicitly emphasize the detrimental influence of human activity upon animal life. In the process, elegy derives from the reversal of the so-called power of great numbers.

- 18 Snakes, on the one hand, and Serena's eagle and stallion, on the other, play roles that fundamentally differ from the representations of other animals in the narrative. All other animals are pluralized whereas they're the odd numbers, taking much textual space and attention. The following excerpt from the very beginning of section 1 reintroduces, through the eyes of the four members of Snipes' crew, the eagle Serena tamed in the eponymous novel:<sup>10</sup>

Ross saw the eagle first. He was about to resume work but instead leaned his ax handle against a tulip poplar, tucked his hands in the back pockets of his overalls, and watched the bird glide above the valley floor. The rest of the crew soon saw the eagle too. Henryson stopped rolling his midmorning cigarette. Snipes lowered his newspaper and set down a last bite of biscuit. Having noticed the silence of his fellows, Quince opened his eyes and gazed drowsily upward. The eagle came toward the lower ridge, its shadow rippling over the slash and stumps the crew had left the previous day. Then the shadow paused. The eagle tucked its wings and javelined earthward. At the last moment, the wings fanned, talons stretching to seize and crush a rattlesnake's head. The men watched as the snake's body flogged the ground, its rattle winding down to a last feeble twitch. At the sound of a metal whistle, raptor and serpent rose as one, as though the reptile's body were revived and sudden-winged, evoking the fire-drakes of Albion.

'She's back,' Snipes said, as the men followed the bird's flight toward the head of the valley. (130)

- 19 This excerpt deserves all our attention as it marks the actual beginning of the plot, right after the brief prologue depicting Serena "stepping out of the Commodore seaplane in July of 1931" and facing "a small but fervent contingent of reporters and photographers" (128). As such, the passage exposes the novella's place and characters: two references to the valley indeed frame the excerpt. Together with verbs of movement, they produce a sense of vastness, as the eagle first "glide[s] above the valley floor," somehow conveying a sense of its bird's eye view, then flees "toward the head of the valley," an expression that also contributes to associating the valley to the many creatures it (no longer) protects. Members of Snipes' crew first encountered in *Serena* are successively reintroduced, starting with Ross, whose name is the first word of the first section—a narrative choice that confirms his status in the novella. But, as the novella starts, each of them is, in turn, reduced to the position of an observer, as indicated by the numerous verbs related to sight: "Ross saw," "[h]e [...] watched," "The rest of the crew soon saw," "Quince [...] gazed drowsily upward," "The men watched." Twice, "see," which designates unintended visions of the eagle, shifts to "watch," which denotes a sense of intent fascination culminating in the common gaze of a captivated "we." The spectacle is remarkable enough to interrupt whatever the loggers were doing in the course of their short break—being "about to resume work," "rolling [a] midmorning cigarette," reading the paper or taking a nap—, thus freezing them in a moment of sheer, awed, contemplation. The eagle draws all the attention at the beginning of the novella: the mere repetition of the noun clause "the eagle," together with synonymous expressions referring to the bird ("shadow," "raptor," "bird"), makes



it the main character at this point. Interestingly, the term *raptor* does not only designate a bird of prey; it also refers to a small or medium-sized dinosaur that ate other animals, which both foreshadows the ultimate vision of the excerpt, "evoking the fire-drakes of Albion," and implicitly hints at the fifth massive extinction.

20 Though they may first appear to be erratic (it "ripple[es] over" the valley), the eagle's movements eventually make full sense to the observers when, "talons stretching," the bird transforms into the killer it is and suddenly "javeline[s] earthward" to clasp its prey. Its efficient cruelty is emphasized by the fact the prey's identification is postponed to the end of the clause describing the eagle's sudden change in direction "to seize and crush a rattlesnake's head." To "crush" is to compress or squeeze a thing forcefully so as to break, damage, or distort it in shape. As a matter of fact, what the observers perceive in the grasp of the eagle's talons is no longer a rattlesnake properly speaking, but merely a head attached to a body that is soon "flogged [to] the ground" and to an untimely death.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the quickness of the eagle's execution of the "serpent" (a word designating a large snake, which makes its quick demise all the more impressive) echoes the deadly efficiency of its mistress, Serena herself, who is both used to inflicting death and to crushing—to subduing violently—people around her for them to comply with her will. In our excerpt, Serena's control over most things is also epitomized by "the sound of [her] metal whistle," which puts an abrupt end to the scene.

21 The eagle certainly operates as Serena's animal embodiment. The compelling image of the flying serpent on which the passage concludes, as "raptor and serpent rose as one, as though the reptile's body were revived and sudden-winged," implies a radical disruption in the order of the natural world. It both represents the extent of Serena's power and further endows her with a mythical dimension, which was already present in the novel where, from a distance, Serena seemed to make one with her stallion and the tamed bird: "From a certain angle, the eagle itself appeared mounted on the saddle. At a distance, horse, eagle and human appeared to blend into one being, as though transmogrified into some winged six-legged creature from the old myths." (Rash, 2008 102)<sup>12</sup> The eeriness of the scene we have extensively examined is enhanced by its majestic silence, barely interrupted by the "last feeble twitch" of the dying reptile; its significance is further corroborated by the cyclic structure of the novella, as the same eagle is depicted circling above the same valley at the very end of the last section:

Serena did not take the eagle into the boxcar right away. Instead, she cast the bird and watched it circle the valley. Snipes and Henryson watched as well. Nothing on the ridges stirred. No squirrel chattered, no bird called, no tree rustled. Only silence. The eagle circled seven times before Serena blew the metal whistle and the bird returned. There was nothing left to destroy. (220).

22 The novella's final scene takes place right after Serena leaves the decimated valley again, this time for good, since the job has been completed and, as the final sentence suggests, all forms of life have been annihilated. Her casting the bird for the last time is a way for both to ascertain that the carnage is, indeed, complete. Again, the reference to number seven strikes out as an ironical reference to the biblical Great Flood, where its occurrence sustains a sense of hope for survival amidst God's planned destruction.<sup>13</sup> The repeated use of negative pronouns and adjectives emphasizes the overall devastation, as a result of the valley's radical emptying. Consequently, the silence that characterized the opening passage of section 1 no longer reflects the observers' awe; most of them, except for Snipes and Henryson, who are about to leave, are dead or gone

already. It is quite literally the silence of death. As the novel draws to a close, the valley no longer is recognizable as such; it is but an empty ark.

## A Poetics of exhaustion

- 23 The association of the valley with an ark is first suggested by the discreet presence of a secondary character that only appears twice in the narrative. What makes him striking are his name and function: Noah Holt, "both train engineer and postmaster" (145), buys Snipes' daily newspaper for him in Sylva and brings it to him. Noah Holt can therefore be considered a local Hermes, ensuring the loggers' connection to the greater world, beyond the valley.<sup>14</sup> Being in charge of the train, he is also the one that eventually takes the loggers, both the living and some of the dead, out of the valley, as the novella draws to a close. Here is the second time he is mentioned in the narrative: "When did Noah say we can get him took to Sylva?" Henryson asked Snipes" (219). "Him" is Ross, whose body Henryson and Snipes will take, according to his wish (215), to the empty grave beside his family's. While Noah Holt takes the logged trees, logging material, surviving loggers and some of the casualties out of the valley, the valley itself tends to be associated with a receptacle that is certainly reminiscent of an ark.
- 24 The phrase "in the valley" recurs, with variation, throughout the novella, operating as a sort of refrain: the simple repetition of prepositional clauses like "over the valley," "across the valley floor" (130, 133), "into the valley" (199), "at the valley's center" (146), "amid the vast floor of stumps and slash" (146) or "across the valley floor" (130), etc. contributes to representing the valley as a vast container, an image that, extending to the novella and to the whole collection, has an obvious metatextual dimension. Throughout the novella, the valley is subjected to simultaneous and apparently contradictory dynamics: it is, at the same time, emptied and filled. As we have noted in the previous section, the emptying results from the very nature of Serena's business: the whole deal consists in shearing the valley of its trees—all of them. Incidentally, as highlighted by the eagle's constant circling, it is also trimmed of its population of reptiles. Indeed, loggers are particularly exposed to snake bites which, as they can be deadly, constitute major threats to the loggers and, from a lumber baroness's perspective, a significant hindrance to their productivity: "Logging [certainly] is a dangerous business" (129).<sup>15</sup> Hence, exit snakes.
- 25 The way death is indiscriminately inflicted in all directions in "In the Valley," hitting "both beast and human" (129), as well as trees, somehow suggests "the intrinsic equality of human and animal, a central tenet of the deep ecology movement" (Pearson 136). Death is, indeed, overwhelming in the novella, in which, besides trees and reptiles, numerous loggers, including Quince and Ross, but also other characters like Meeks and Galloway's mother, face traumatizing deaths. In the process, the valley is gradually emptied of all its components and inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. Meanwhile, its widening vacuum is filled with a dense fog that transiently hides the horrendous reality of the carnage. For instance, in section 12, as he makes "his descent into the valley" (199), Brandonkamp fails to gauge the progress of the loggers because of the fog:

He looked toward the east ridge. It was immersed in whiteness. Most everything else was as well. Work continued. He could hear the shay engine, the skidder and

McGiffert loader. Such conditions surely slowed the progress though that hardly mattered now. (200)

- 26 Since vision is totally impaired by the invisibilizing fog, Brandomkamp has to trust his sense of hearing. But his observation that “[s]uch conditions surely slowed the progress” could not be farther removed from what is actually going on. Indeed, together with Serena’s removal of all clocks and watches from the camp, the thick fog that some interpret as the effect of “some sleight of hand,” further contributes to the suspension of time that, contrary to Brandomkamp’s assessment of the situation, considerably increases the loggers’ working power and output by lengthening their days to inhuman proportions and blinding them to the very sequence of day and night<sup>16</sup>. Deprived of all their landmarks—“Sure it was a dream?,” “Sure that we’re awake?” (191)—, the loggers just keep working. The following scene occurs in the middle of section 10:

The rain ceased, but the sun did not appear. Instead, tendrils of fog began to knit together. The fog covered the valley floor and, like water *filling* a pond, slowly rose. The camp buildings disappeared, then the ridges. The fog seemed to have swaddled the world inside some older measure. What had been cracks sharp as gunshots were now not only softened but also unsourced. In some places, such was the denseness that ax heads floated into view, vanished before striking wood. Logs hooked to cables appeared too late to be dodged. Crews lost all bearings of where other crews were. The injured were hard to locate, and their muffled cries and moans *filled* the ridge. More trees fell, but how far or near was hard to gauge, as some men realized too late. (192-193; my emphasis)

- 27 At the same time as it is being emptied, the valley ominously “fills” (the verb occurs twice) with a fog that is so dense (it is almost palpable) that the familiar contours of the world vanish. The passage is indeed saturated with the lexicon of disappearance with verb forms like “did not appear,” “disappeared,” “appeared too late” or “vanished.” The shift from “had been” to “were now” within the same sentence accounts for a radical transformation in the perception of all things, resulting in an utter disorientation: objects like ax heads, hooked logs or Serena herself for that matter, enter the loggers’ and the readers’ vision unannounced and out of the blue, as if “unsourced.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as the narrator puts it a few pages later, “with the omnipresent fog, there was nothing to see” (202), making the loggers’ task heedless and aimless—a directionless cutting.<sup>18</sup> Hence it is often “too late” for the former to avoid the dangers they are usually able to anticipate. Meanwhile, the verbs “covered” and “swaddled” imbue the passage with a paradoxical sense of smoothness, which is also to be found in the subdued forms “softened,” “muffled” or “floated.” Blurred perceptions thus stand in sharp contrast with the inherent violence of the scene. But instead of operating as a hindrance, the timeless fog has the result expected by Serena: in their dreamlike torpor, oblivious of danger, the loggers cut “more trees” or, as it turns out, they just die doing so, in which case they are imperceptibly replaced by other workers.<sup>19</sup> An instrument of Serena’s victory, the “omnipresent fog” (202) also contributes to the all-encompassing sense of disappearance that pervades the novella, sustaining the narrative’s elegiac tone. It is, above all, the material out of which Rash carves out his characters and sceneries, allowing him to convey the eerie sense of a filling emptiness.
- 28 While their perception of time and their sense of their whereabouts are dramatically tested, the loggers are reminded of their beat bodies with a vengeance:

Whether time passed slow or fast, or even passed at all, Snipes and his men no longer knew, were uncertain even what day it was. The fog lightened but did not

lift. Instead of time they had the ridgetop, which could be clearly seen now, though the men were so exhausted they feared that, as parched men in deserts saw oases before them, the crest might be a mirage. (208)

29 Numerous passages in the novella similarly insist on the loggers' physical exhaustion, which is palpable in the dragging syntax of the preceding quote, a logical consequence of their cold-hearted exploitation. Twice a day, they are overfed—almost force-fed—, like animals or fueled like machines, as suggested by Ross in the following conversation, which takes place at the mess hall: "I never eat so much in all my life,' Henryson said when he finally set down his knife and fork. 'Stoking us like we're nothing but machines,' Ross said." (178) Likewise, at the beginning of section 10, the loggers are described enjoying a plentiful, though very early, breakfast before returning to work. But at the same time as s/he describes the avalanche of food they are offered, the narrator suggests that the abundance of goods may have been obtained by "force or barter" (189). In the process, the loggers' bellies are filled thanks to the emptying of kitchens around camp—in other words, thanks to stealing from the needful. Together with the extensive use of the notion of exhaustion, which both refers to physical fatigue and to the dilapidation of resources of various kinds, the way the dialectics of emptying and filling operates on several levels of the text is quite remarkable.

30 This narrative device reaches a peak in Rash's evocation of the animals of the valley, whose conspicuous absence Quince's novice eyes are attentive to from the start:

Quince stepped away from the others and unbuttoned his trousers. As he pissed he stared at the west ridge. In a swamp you could cut down trees and know there were still fish swimming around where the trees had been, and on their stumps you'd see frogs and cooters and birds. But here the pale stumps made the land look poxed, as if infected by some dread disease. One that had killed off all the critters too, because Quince hadn't seen a single rabbit, deer, or bird on the land they'd cut. He thought longingly of his Georgia farm, now beneath the surface of a lake. He buttoned up his trousers and rejoined the others. (134-135)

31 Quince is not used to logging in the mountains, in which respect his posture reflects that of readers of the novella that may not be familiar with "the Cataloochee camp" (150) and its practices. He cannot help comparing what he sees with what he best knows, his experience as a logger in the Georgia swamps.<sup>20</sup> Though his nostalgic thoughts are humorously contrasted with the fact they occur to him while he is emptying his bladder, they convey a number of significant information. The first is that ecosystems respond differently to logging: while logging in the swamps allows the persistence of some forms of animal life (fish, frogs, turtles and birds), in the mountains the eradication is total. Once trees are felled, all other forms of life are affected, as though contaminated by an infectious disease, and eventually effaced. At this point in the narrative, the crews are far from being done with their task; yet "all the critters" are gone already. Some were indeed "killed off," most are leaving.

32 The elegiac tone of the novella mostly derives from the brief paragraphs in italics—a late find in the composition of the novella—that are to be found on single unnumbered pages in between sections, respectively at the end of sections 2 (144), 4 (161), 7 (181) and 13 (212). These floating additions both complete and counterpoint with the narrative sections. Each of these paragraphs centers on the departure of one family of animals, first mammals, then fish, birds, and finally reptiles, quite in keeping with the

narrative itself since snakes are indeed described as the most resilient life form in the mountains. Here is the first such floating paragraph in its entirety:

The mountain lion was the first to depart the valley. The front paw lost years back to a trap's steel teeth was warning enough. As the trees began to fall, others followed: black bear and bobcat, otter and mink, some in pairs, some singly. Then beaver and weasel, deer and muskrat, groundhog and fox. After them raccoon and rabbit, opossum and chipmunk, squirrel and vole, deer mouse and shrew... (144)

- 33 As in this first instance, which focuses on mammals, the added paragraphs repertory the order in which animals supposedly took their leave from a valley that became unable to satisfy their needs for food and protection. In the process, the valley's inexorable emptying somehow reverses the motif of Noah's Ark filling with pairs of animals, in each case "a male and his female" (Genesis: 7), in the hope of renewed life after the deluge. As pointed out by the phrase "*some in pairs, some singly*," which is used again in the third such paragraph (181), the grouping at work in the ark to ensure potential reproduction is far from being systematic in Rash's reverse rewriting of the myth.<sup>21</sup> In all four paragraphs, except for the animal mentioned at the beginning of each list, all following animals go in pairs. But, unlike the animals going aboard Noah's Ark, the creatures paired in "In the Valley" belong to different species: as a result, the future of their kind is far from being ensured. Their grouping is, before all, a poetic gesture, both guided by data on local zoology and motivated by sound effects. Indeed, in a surfeit of alliterations in /b/, the black bear calls for the bobcat; assonances in /i:/ bring beaver, weasel and deer together, whereas the raccoon is euphoniously followed by the rabbit. Rash's poetic taste for the sounds of words once again comes to the fore in the sometimes unlikely associations he creates. Such lines certainly match one of the main concerns of extinction poetry, displaying "its concern with the loss of beauty from the natural world because of the assault of human activities upon wildness and wild creatures" (Pearson 142). Along the logic of the filling vacuum that is at work in the novella, Rash's concern with the loss of beauty is the occasion for him to engender beauty with his talent for words and their music, thus paying tribute to species on the inexorable path to extinction.
- 34 The four paragraphs which, at irregular intervals in the novella, repertory the disappearances of species—and beyond them of whole animal classes—, paradoxically operate as moments of respiration in the text as they timelessly float in and out of the tension of the narrative, and in and out of the fog. While they result from the environmental plundering evoked in the plot, thus verifying that "humans are the greatest threat to the realm of wildness" (Pearson 141), they also refer to a wider, somehow indefinite, timeframe. Each paragraph is built according to the same pattern: a specific species initiates what will soon turn out to be a collective departure—the mountain lion, the speckle trout, the broad-winged hawk, and the blue-ridge salamander.<sup>22</sup> These stand out in the syntactic structure of the paragraphs: their role in triggering the movement out of the valley is marked by their association with verbs of departure, "depart" in the first case, "leave" in the next three. In the first two instances, the animals' departure is associated with a specific circumstance that may account for it: "*As the trees began to fall, ...*" (144) "*As silt choked the creek, ...*" (161); but in the next two instances, no such contextual information is given: the movement has become inevitable and irreversible. In each paragraph the verb that puts the exodus into motion then yields to forms indicating a mere continuation of the initial movement ("follows," "and then," "and after," etc.). Through the long processions

which, in each instance, take the form of uninterrupted sentences punctuated by an accumulation of comas, the depletion of the valley appears to be endless and unstoppable, which is further confirmed, in each case, by the conclusive ellipsis: "...and after that the yellow warbler and goldfinch, barn swallow and rose-breasted grosbeak, red-winged blackbird and eastern bluebird, raven and mourning dove..." (181) The paragraph devoted to birds (the final clauses of which are reproduced above) and the one centering on fish bristle with animal names that are particularly colorful: for instance, "red-winged blackbird and eastern bluebird" or "blacktail redhorse and rosyside dace" (161) conjure up myriad vivid colors, which sharply contrast with the bleakness of the devastated valley and the grayness of the fog. With the departures of its animal residents, the valley is therefore further depleted of its colors, the colors that ensure its sometimes miraculous beauty. In "In the Valley," Rash, the elegiac poet, points out how leaving animals take the valley's colors away with them, which results in an overall discoloring, the aesthetic consequence of its utter depletion of all forms of life. At the same time, as he elegizes the vanishing species, he also preserves their vivid colors within the timeless pages of literature.

- 35 Ending is a central issue in Rash's first novella, "In the Valley," as Serena once again demonstrates the extent of her notorious ingeniousness to meet the deadline of an impossible deal, which is finally closed in her favor. The conditions to which she subjects her crews of loggers are so inhumane that even the stronger among them repeatedly want it to end. The urge to end actually becomes Ross's motto: "All I know is I want it to end" (191), "This has got to end" (211), which retrospectively sound like very ominous words. "In the Valley" depicts an ecosystem on the verge of dying under the combined influences of ruthless exploitation and incidental diseases. What the novella shows is how once the cogs have started turning, all forms of life are indiscriminately threatened: men get hurt in the process, some work to the death; whole ecosystems succumb to the long-term consequences of the first felled trees, entailing the demise of other forms of vegetation and the extinction of many forms of animal life, whose sustenance and survival depended on the natural equilibrium of the place. The novella thus suggests that "humankind is an animal species, and only one animal of many" (Pearson 141), thus indirectly questioning the "complacency" (Soper 747) of our time and making it clear that the end is inexorably approaching, that it has been approaching for decades.
- 36 Though it is mostly a prose narrative, "In the Valley" can be read as an example of extinction poetry insofar as it "calls the reader's attention to the extent of the environmental crisis, warns that encounters with humans or human activities lead inevitably to the devastation of wild species, notes that we have only ourselves to blame for the parlous state of the natural world, and mourns those species already extinguished" (Pearson 130). But, instead of admonishing its readers, the novella circuitously points to an extremely preoccupying situation reaching far beyond the space of the valley by awakening our deep sense of loss as we are made to face the desolate vision of "the valley's empty arc" (218) in the final section. Meanwhile, it fleetingly preserves the bright colors of a dying world between its thin pages. In the process, Rash's writing certainly contributes to making his readers skeptical to human exceptionalism, inscribing himself in what Isabelle Stengers describes as "a culture of storytelling [...] that prepare[s] one to approach a situation in its particularity as such and not only as a ground for the application of objective knowledge. Stories [...] make

us sensitive to all the discordant voices that make up a situation, they teach us to listen and to pay attention" (Stengers 56)<sup>23</sup>.

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## NOTES

1. Published in 2014, *Something Rich and Strange*, a volume of selected stories, includes a couple of new stories.
2. "Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [...] Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company" (Haraway 58).
3. Some characters in *Saints at the River* (2004) are passionately engaged in the preservation of wildlife in the Tamassee River. The Carolina parakeet is a central figure in *The Cove* (2012). Several stories and poems display the writer's concern with vanishing species: it is notably the case of "The Woman who Believed in Jaguars" in *Burning Bright* (2010), while several poems in *Raising the Dead* (2002)—"Panther Tree," "The Wolves at the Asheville Zoo," "Carolina Parakeet"—pay tribute to vanishing or extinct species.
4. The novella's opening paragraphs evoke both "the rumors surrounding her husband's death" (129) and "the rumor that [Serena] was connected to the recent demise of Horace Kephart, the park's chief advocate" (130), which relates the novella to yet another text, the short story entitled "Kephart," which Rash first published in its French translation for a 2021 Gallimard collection of short stories by various authors, *À Nous la Terre!* (which could translate as *The Earth is ours!*).
5. The remaining three, respectively sections 6, 11 and 15, are centered around Rachel and her son Isaac, who are trying to start a new life, away from Galloway's ghost, in Seattle. These sections are very brief and quite elliptical, confirming Rash's strategy of decentering his main characters from the novel to the novella.
6. Rash's renewed concern with Snipes' crew of loggers, which operates as a kind of chorus in *Serena* (See Spill, *Radiance*, pp. 99-113), is marked by his keen attention to their language. Indeed, whereas his main characters exchange but a few practical words in "In the Valley," Snipes and his men express themselves in iambic pentameters, a cunning stylistic choice that further confirms the overall strategy of decentering and recentering that is at work in the novella. In the process, the loggers' dialogues are in turn imbued with an elegiac tone, that reveals their concern with the non-human world.  
Besides Ross, whose name we have commented on in the chapter evoked in this paragraph, Quince, the new recruit in Snipes' crew, also has a Shakespearean name, which evokes a character in *Midsummer Night's Dream*.
7. Rash's minute description of the nightmarish end of Meeks' dream compellingly plays with lights (the rising moon, Galloway's lantern, the lights of the depot he will never reach, the flickering lights of surfacing childhood memories) and shadows: "The moon was higher, its light spilling across the road. At the top of the rise, the road leveled. To his right the ground conjoined with the valley's north ridge, where last November, the logging had begun. Just nine months ago his future had been all bright promise. Once the valley was logged, Serena Pemberton would send him back to Boston, where, as head of Pemberton Lumber's U.S. operations, he'd be feted as a rising captain of industry. That had been the dream, not this nightmare" (156). Keeping up with the novella's gothic mood, section 5 provides the reader with background information deriving from *Serena*, returning to the cause and circumstances of Galloway's allegiance to Serena (166). Beyond this, we learn that Galloway buried his severed hand, "with the palm facing up. That way it'll know which way to dig, she told him" (*Ibid.*). The section thus concludes on a gothic vision of Galloway's hand "digging out of the sand" (*Ibid.*) and finding its way to Rachel and "her bastard son" (165).
8. Rash expresses himself on the irreconcilable distinction between politicians and writers in Spill, *Radiance*, 199.
9. See Spill, *Radiance*, 128-129.



10. Though the readers and characters of *Serena* now take this unlikely feat for granted, Quince, a new hire in "In the Valley," plays the part of the disbeliever: "Quince had disputed nothing until Snipes made the most outrageous claim of all, that Mrs. Pemberton had trained an eagle to kill rattlesnakes and bring them back to her *like a setter retrieving quail*. [...] He told Snipes that he'd listened to some haystack-high bullshit in his life but none taller than this eagle yarn" (132; my emphasis). Serena's ability to temper with the natural order is encapsulated by the humorous comparison of the royal eagle with a well-behaved dog.

11. Both the novel and the novella emphasize that snakes constitute one of the major dangers to which loggers are faced. In "In the Valley," the first bite is described at the end of section 1. Snipes, maybe thanks to the superstitious colors he wears to ward off danger, is its lucky victim: "Not a bit of luck," he said. "It was the brightness" (136). But, in keeping with Henryson's prediction, snake biting scenes will recur throughout the novella, with much more serious outcomes. Yet, as suggested by the fourth floating elegiac paragraph, which is centered on snakes, not all reptiles are to be feared; most actually are innocuous (212).

12. Rash's haunting initial image for *Serena* resurfaces, unchanged: "Serena Pemberton was astride the white Arabian, rare and imperious as its owner" (131) (See Spill 2019, 194). The mythical dimension of the novella is further conveyed by the eerie presence of "the old crone," Galloway's prophesying mother—who is also compared with a reptile taking the sun (146)—, and by the suggestion that she and Serena can conjure up the fog and master the natural elements to their benefit. Indeed, in "In the Valley," the unusually thick fog in the middle of the Appalachian summer blurs the sun, thus the distinction between day and night. As a result, it contributes to the suspension of time initiated by Serena when she removes all the clocks on camp and takes all the workers' watches in order to make them work endless hours to meet the deadline (152). As she puts it herself, she quite literally "make[s] the time" (150).

13. "Then the LORD said to Noah: [...] 'You shall take with you seven each of every clean animal, a male and his female; two each of animals that *are* unclean, a male and his female; also seven each of birds of the air, male and female, to keep the species alive on the face of all the earth. For after seven more days I will cause it to rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and I will destroy from the face of the earth all living things that I have made'" (Genesis: 7).

14. In Greek mythology, Hermes is both the winged herald and messenger of the Olympian gods; he is also the god of roads, flocks and commerce.

15. While Snipes gets away with a "dry bite" (136) at the end of section 1, Quince will succumb to a venomous bite as a viper catches him unawares in section 8: "Quince was clearing away some shorn branches when he felt the bite. At first, he did not know what had happened. Then, looking closer, he saw the viper's slit eyes and triangular head. Quince jerked his hand away. The fangs remained clamped to Quince's wrist, and he stumbled backward, the satin-black body lengthened to five feet before the blunt tail, vibrating fiercely, appeared. Still in the ground, Quince tried to shake the snake off, which caused the reptile to twine around the stricken limb" (208-9). Hornets constitute yet another deadly threat in section 7: "One was carried straight to the graveyard. The crew next to Snipes' stumbled off the ridge, swatting and swearing as hornets swarmed around them. One man rolled on the ground as if on fire, while another wallowed facedown in the silt-logged creek" (176).

16. "It would have to be some sleight of hand, perhaps something she knew the fog would hide" (204). Serena or Mrs. Galloway's possible power over the natural elements would deserve a much more detailed examination.

17. Serena appears "to hover above the ground" (193), in which respect she is reminiscent of the riders that gradually take shape out of the fog in the collection's initial short story, "Neighbors." *In the Valley* actually is a very foggy collection throughout.

18. The phrase "there was nothing to see" (202) foreshadows the final sentence of the novella, which we have evoked earlier: "There was nothing left to destroy" (220).

19. See 206-207. Section 7 retraces a whole day of work in the lives of the loggers now they no longer own watches and time is in Serena's hands, from the moment they walk up the ridge (173) to the moment they stumble down again, exhausted, obeying the bell's unspoken orders, like animals. The section is indeed rhythmized by the sound of the bell: "The bell clanged and the men gulped down their coffee and gathered in the still-dark yard" (173), "The bell clanged again only as the day's last gray light expired" (177). Serena's treatment of her workers further blurs the distinction between humans and animals.

20. Another major environmental change is alluded to in Quince's meditation, a change that is to be found at the heart of Rash's two 2002 publications, *One Foot in Eden*, his first novel, and *Raising the Dead*, his third collection of poems. Both "revolve around the construction of Lake Jocassee in South Carolina and its dramatic consequences on Jocassee Valley's residents, both living and dead, since all had to be displaced before the flooding" (Spill 2019, 32). Quince's vision of his "Georgia farm, now beneath the surface of a lake" implies that he has experienced a similar displacement for similar reasons, which may account for his move to the mountains.

21. In *How the Dead Dream*, a novel published the same year as *Serena*, Lydia Millet makes a similar use of the motif of Noah's Ark, as her narrator contends that: "[t]his quiet mass disappearance, the inversion of the Ark, was passing unnoticed" (Millet 139). As he experiences a drastic life change as a result of successive encounters with death and failure, the latter develops a new and rather unlikely (considering his booming career as a trader and developer) awareness of and concern with animal life, noting that "[t]he animals [...] were in the middle of dying, not only at a time but in sweeps and categories" (*Ibid.*) and capturing, much as Rash does in his own poetic way, "the long moment of going before being gone" (197).

22. For a detailed reading of the role of trout in Rash's poetry and fiction, see my paper on "The Pursuit of Happiness, or Contemplating Trout in Ron Rash's Fiction."

23. (My translation). "[U]ne culture du récit [...] qui prépar[e] à aborder une situation dans sa particularité [...] et pas seulement comme terrain pour l'application d'un savoir objectif. Les récits [...] rendent sensibles à toutes les voix discordantes qui composent une situation, ils apprennent à écouter et à faire attention."

## ABSTRACTS

This paper argues that Ron Rash's 2020 return to his 2009 bestseller, *Serena*, and to its eponymous character's destructive frenzy operates as a pretext for him to deal, in his own poetic way, with the devastating consequences of such ruthless exploitative behaviors and their lethal contribution to the sixth extinction. This paper shows that "In the Valley" partakes of the genre of the poetry of extinction. Focusing on the diverse ways in which the valley's inexorable emptying is represented, it regards "In the Valley" as an animal elegy that poetically represents the inexorable extinction of numerous species.

Cet article démontre que le retour de Ron Rash en 2020 à son bestseller paru en 2009, *Serena*, et à la frénésie destructrice de son personnage éponyme constitue un prétexte lui permettant de traiter des conséquences désastreuses de ce mode d'exploitation sans vergogne et de sa contribution mortifère à la sixième extinction. Cet article inscrit « In the Valley » dans le genre défini comme *poetry of extinction*, en se focalisant sur les diverses représentations de l'évidement

inexorable de la vallée. Le texte est ainsi considéré comme une élégie animale qui dépeint, de manière poétique, l'extinction de nombreuses espèces.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Ron Rash, forests, logging, sixth extinction, animals, trees, poetry of extinction

**Mots-clés:** Ron Rash, forêts, exploitation forestière, sixième extinction, animaux, arbres, poetry of extinction

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