

2023

Worth The Struggle

Evann Schwantes

Follow this and additional works at: https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards

Recommended Citation

Schwantes, Evann, "Worth The Struggle" (2023). *Writing Excellence Award Winners*. 128.
https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards/128

This Social Sciences is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research and Creative Works at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writing Excellence Award Winners by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

*footnotes are used both to cite references as well as to explain stanzas

Worth The Struggle

By Evann Schwantes

With Dread I see a man.

Looking back at me
through silver glass.

A mirror with passage
both ways—

And a chasm opening up beneath me.

Darwin's descent was one of
hopeful progress—²²

Mine is the horror of
watching animals get better and better
at killing one another.²³

What will be left
when progress carries us
to the end of the world?

I was taught to know of the Gods that lived before,
the ones who lifted the world

²² 'Some kinds of suffering, Darwin implied, must be borne, because they pressed the human species upward.' (Kristin Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, Prometheus Publishing, 2023, 138)

²³ 'Extermination campaigns of General Rosas on the Argentine pampas, noted earlier. Elsewhere, as Darwin wrote in his account of the voyage, "besides the several evident causes of destruction" (he listed the introduction of alcohol, European diseases, and the gradual extinction of wild animals' (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 78)

closer to heaven.²⁴

These ascended men–

To be revered–

To be honored–

Remembered–

As I found places in pages where

myths unraveled–

truth began to seep in:

the reality of ‘righteous’ wars

the reality of ‘justified’ bombs

the reality of ‘great’ men

Every virtue and atrocity entwined

Gods made up of stories

we tell

to comfort ourselves²⁵

Comfort luring us into patterns

Change coming by way of a pale horseman²⁶

²⁴ ‘Paley and Malthus thought that, in describing the “general laws” through which God chose to govern, they were recovering God’s benevolence, wisdom and power’ (Johnson, *Darwin’s Falling Sparrow*, 51)

²⁵ In school, the most I remember learning about Darwin was a singular paragraph describing Darwin and his finches. As talked about in class, this myth of Darwin teaches complacency. Darwin based his work on something he witnessed before his eyes, it was proof beyond a doubt in his theory of evolution. Anyone who disagrees is irrational and is blind to the facts. This puts people in a mindset of ‘the work is done, it’s been decided,’ this mindset is comforting but it keeps us from turning a critical eye to the biases that pervade science history.

²⁶ The rule of not using scientific observation to make moral claims about how society “should be” being instituted after war. It took many people dying for the conversation to meaningfully change. (Discussed in class).

History bastardizes.
We retell, extrapolate,
wash clean

Our own eyes,
Every sense of the body—
bound forever with the partiality
of the mind
molded by generations
past

Where is neutrality in DNA?
Where is clear reason in the structures of the body?

When our eyes deceive,
When we mishear,
When we use anything to justify our behaviors and beliefs,²⁷
And remember only what serves us.

Rationality
Through science?
Bestowed by a heavenly Father?²⁸

Darwin—

²⁷ In one section of *The Descent of Man* Darwin writes about sex differences, he begins by discussing average physical traits that differ between sexes (averages can be immensely misleading) and then he begins to make descriptive claims about personality and morality differences between the sexes. He does not cite sources for these claims, rather he leans on vague allusions to animals to justify his claims. He wrote to justify a belief he held because of his social context. Darwin ignored the outliers that he knew in real life, women (like Harriet Martineau) who were prominent, brilliant, and far from the docile and self-sacrificing picture he painted of women in his book. (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 87) (Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 95)

²⁸ 'Since the seventeenth century, some British philosophers had claimed that belief in God was a uniquely human trait that separated human beings from the rest of the animal world.' (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 72) The Dignity of Man being belief in God and the 'gift' of reason.

a leader in his field,
well educated,²⁹
experienced,³⁰
his whole life dedicated to impartiality,
to the discovery of truth within the natural world,
—placed races and sexes on a hierarchy.³¹

He saw indigenous people as savages,³²
Supposedly less fit for the world
than he.

Through his eyes,
The extinction of non-white races
was a regretful inevitability³³

Grown and watered
in the dirt of colonialism,
Darwin carried the residue of the violent systems
that raised him.

²⁹ Darwin studied at Edinburgh and Cambridge. At Cambridge he studied under some of the most influential experts at the time, Robert Grant, John Henslow, and Adam Sedgwick. He had ample access to some of the best education a person could receive at the time. (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 54-60)

³⁰ Darwin sailed around the world, met many people of different races, many of whom he empathized with. Upon returning home, he worked for an entire decade studying and working hands on with numerous different animals before publishing his first book. He was surrounded by differing perspectives on humanity and wrote letters to many correspondence around the world before publishing his second book.

³¹ 'Thus, man has ultimately become superior to woman.' (Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 95)

³² 'We here saw the native Fuegian; an untamed savage is I really think one of the most extraordinary spectacles in the world.—the difference between a domesticated & wild animal is far more strikingly marked in man.—in the naked barbarian, with his body coated with paint, whose very gestures, whether they may be peaceable or hostile are unintelligible, with difficulty we see a fellow-creature.' Darwin's letter to his sister regarding Jemmy Button's people. (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 73) Though Darwin recognized a 'fellow creature' he still describes them with animal language, dehumanizing them as he attempts to recognize their humanity.

³³ 'But while he conceded that "moralists" might lament the extinction of "savages," he ultimately held that overall the process that led to such extinction was beneficent because, in his view, it led to human progress.' (Kristin Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 138)

His eyes,
that he claimed were clear of bias,
molded the objectivity of nature
to resemble the Victorian
Moral³⁴

Under guise of progress
Under guise of science and reasoning
British society adopted a new theory
to justify
reaping all that was not theirs
The salt of the earth
The bodies of their brethren³⁵

The gentry, hands un-calloused,
skin pale,
and flesh prone to disease,
accepted the rhetoric that they were the highest form of humanity³⁶
they were the future
they were closest to God
Because they had institution,
and they had guns

Violence shrouded in morality,

³⁴ Darwin's theory of evolution mapped on well to the growing Middle Class in Britain. Despite the way that Darwin's theory distanced God, it also emphasized competition, which justified the capitalist economic structure that allowed the Middle Class to assert their influence. Darwin's theory also naturalized slow and gradual change. The Middle Class in Britain wanted just enough change so that they could continue to gain power without there being a sudden upheaval of the system by way of revolt. Darwin's theory perfectly reflected these ideals. (Discussed in class)

³⁵ '*The Descent of Man* naturalized the belief that, overall, Europeans were "more advanced" and thus justified in overwhelming everyone else.' (Kristin Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, Prometheus Publishing, 2023, 138-139)

³⁶ 'Thus, Darwin pushed some human communities closer to animals, constantly writing of "higher races" and "lower races" (with "higher" generally meaning those most like him in values, appearance, and behavior)' (Kristin Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, Prometheus Publishing, 2023, 135)

steeped in ambiguity.

People constructed for themselves the 'true' nature of Darwin.

In between the spaces he left blank
and along the tension lines of his opposing paragraphs
people found their own causes

Then time moved on
and people picked bare his books
reshaped his legacy³⁷
and left behind his disappointing humanity

As Darwin spoke through nature,
History spoke through Darwin,
To justify abolition³⁸
To justify slavery
Justify contraception³⁹
Justify war⁴⁰
Justify suffering
Justify genocide⁴¹

³⁷ As discussed in class, Darwin's legacy was reshaped once it served people politically to have a hero of evolution that stood with progress and 'natural' competition.

³⁸ 'For although some radical abolitionists cited *Origin* as proof of their belief in human unity, others used Darwin's work to emphasize divergence, whether humans shared a common ancestor or not.' (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 145)

³⁹ '[Annie Besant] also explicitly enlisted Darwin's vision of nature in her campaigns, certain that particular reforms followed logically, scientifically, from his new explanation for the origin of man. The most infamous and radical of those campaigns was for wider, and cheaper, access to information on contraception' (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 150)

⁴⁰ 'All sides, from Russian bolsheviks to British biologists, called upon evolution to both explain the war and imagine how society should be organized when the war ended. They would repeat those arguments, with even more terrible weapons, in 1938, after Nazi Germany turned on its own people under cover of "race hygiene" and began a merciless struggle to expand "living space" for "the Aryan race."' (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 162)

⁴¹ "Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world." (Excerpt of Darwin's letter to William Graham in 1881) (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 140)

Sentences left out,
images sanitized beneath the paint,
a man who spoke seeds of hope,
of capital,
of progress,
and of violence

Scattered on the wind,
Grew in different directions
Opposing beliefs,
Opposing ideas,
Some inspiring,
Some destructive.

Yet, it is to the violence that eyes are drawn,
And it is violence that begets violence.

So
Dominos fell
Spools Unraveled
and a butterfly made the earth quake
beneath its wing.

History takes, and it consumes,
it props you up against heroes
and villains alike

You die
and on the other side of a century,
nobody knows you anymore—
they know only the whispers that are passed down
Condemned to mythos

Your words and work
turned into tools
for movements
that you no longer have a voice to condemn or support

When you exist in the public eye
You relinquish ownership
To all that you have labored for
When you exist in history books
Connective tissues form,
inevitably,
Between you,
and
Destruction

Is it really such an honor to be remembered?

What hope is there for me?

How lightly can we walk when memories outlive and wander?

I hope, like he,
To do some good
And contribute
To the positive progression of the world

and I am blind, like he,
to the corners to which this
fire of mine will spread
and who it will warm
and who it will burn.

My foresight will fail me
people will misuse my words
I will inspire hurt
if I'm lucky,
I will inspire hope too
I am at the mercy of generations to come,
as future generations are at the mercy of me.

So, to them, I will try to leave
truth without bias
rhetoric of peace
a kinder world to live in

With the humility that I probably know no better than my grandmothers,

I will try

Blind as Evolution⁴²

To grow into something that was worth the struggle.

⁴² 'Darwin saw natural selection (when applied to human beings) as in the main a good, albeit completely blind, force.' (Johnson, *Darwin's Falling Sparrow*, 140)