

EDGE

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Cover designed by Sara Lefsyk, with Jo Ungar, and handmade by Sara Lefsyk for Ethel Zine & Micro Press

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EDGE

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for Stu

The Natural is but the Supernatural disclosed.

—Emily Dickinson

*In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy
sawing off the limb on which it is perched.*

—Paul Ehrlich

AS IF

We cannot save a single light-
second. Daylight always
plunging into night,
winging past us into space,

the only constant. Everything
spinning around and inside us.
My son asks, *Did you know*
we have face mites that come out

at night and feed on our faces?
We cannot even count the ants
or name the animals
before we wipe them out.

Daylight doesn't need saving.
We need daylight to save
us from our night terrors, singing
its steady song of the sun.

Where would we stash it,
in jars or banks? The rich
would steal endless summer days
from the poor, huddled like penguins in arctic night.

One day before spring, this little clutch of light,
how soon it will change colors and escape
into the past, where so many others rustle forgotten
despite all our tricks with clocks and rocketships.

When we asked our mother's mother how she was,
in the home where she no longer knew us,
she said, *The days pass very pleasantly*
and the food is delicious.

AVERAGE MONKEY

We are just an average breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe.

—Stephen Hawking

I.

Remember seaglass?
Sandwiches in waxed paper?

A seahorse twines its delicate tail
around a pink plastic Q-tip

We've made a billion elephants'
worth of plastic *Plastikos* pliable

from *plassein* to mold Our detritus
descried in the deepest bellies

of lanternfish rakery beacon-lamps
stout sawpalates scaly dragonfish

When my father began to hallucinate
he saw heads in the dishwasher and cupboards

I know they aren't real he said
but sometimes I wonder what they like to eat

II.

What to do with this dread?

Take the long view
 Kalpas unimaginable eons

The void O
a mouth exhaling
 first a universe ultimately nothing

Everything that seems important to you

isn't

each atom 9,999 parts
 empty space
one part
vibrating energy

Things exist
but they are not real

MINUTE LEAF CHAMELEON

(Brookesia Minima)

Looking like
lichen on thin
branches they

sleep big as
your thumb
nail if threatened

drop to leaf
litter and play dead
twig where they

forage for fruit
flies. Courting he
circles her nodding

and rocking for
days till she makes
up her tiny mind

jerking side to
side she rejects
him or he mounts

her back she
carries him until
that night they make

it in their small
way. A month
later she'll lay two

eggs among the
leaves where they'll
hatch in three

months as long as
we let the ever
shrinking ever

green rain
forest of
Madagascar be.

MADAGASCAN MOON MOTH

(Argemma mitrei)

He has only a handful of nights
 to find her. She barely moves
 from her loose, silver silk cocoon.
 She hangs to dry her gold velvet wings,
 her eggs good only for a day.
 He must move fast, evading bats,
 to win one endless day of copulation
 so she can lay her hundred eggs and die.

Most will feed birds, but the few caterpillars
 who survive munch nonstop for months,
 molt their chitin skin four times before,
 fat and bright green, they spin
 their moonlike cocoons (cratered with holes
 for the rain to run through) where they'll sleep
 half their life away, changing into
 their splendid final dress.

Wings a golden hand-span, edged black
 as burnt toast, their russet scallops
 and purple eyespots work as camo
 in the remnant rainforest.
 They do not eat. They live for a week
 off the fat stored in their gold-furred bodies.
 His feathery antennae can pick up
 her pheromones from miles away—

Endangered by slash-and-burn,
 they can be raised in captivity
 on fresh eucalyptus. You can buy
 their eggs online (ten for twenty pounds)
 their exquisite corpses, framed, 150 bucks.

—Still there in the Madagascar night,
she silently summons a trembling male,
who vibrates his brave body and wings
to warm himself for takeoff in the cold highlands.
To distract bats, he spins his extravagant
and expendable long red tail. They aim for that
and miss him as he burns through the dark,
improbable and fleeting, the Comet Moth.

PUNK MUPPET

(Mary River Turtle, *Elusor macrurus*)

This unlikely rock star,
with bright green Mohawk
& whiskers of vertical algae,

crazed glass eyes & finger-
like growths beneath its chin,
looks like a troll doll or punk muppet.

Can stay underwater for days
breathing through its cloaca. Just made
the Top Thirty on the EDGE List—

because one guy sold
15,000 eggs to the pet trade,
because they live only

in the Mary River,
because Australia
has no plan to save them.

Elusor macrurus has long claws
like the godhero
in The Shape of Water.

Might it be saved by weirdness
& good looks? Its plight's
gone viral. What of #1 on the charts,

the Madagascar big-headed turtle,
still being taken for food
& trade? People are hungry.

In China some buy for good luck
plastic key fobs with live fish
or tiny turtles inside.

Some buy just to set them free.

CALLING BLUE WHALES

(Balaenoptera musculus)

Melville used the sailors' term, Sulphur Bottom:

*seldom seen never chased
 would run away with rope-walks of line
 Prodigies are told of him
 I can say nothing more that is true
 nor can the oldest Nantucketer.*

Blue Whale

from Norwegian *blabval*
 named by Svend Foyn
 inventor of the exploding harpoon gun—
 a century later
 they were all but gone.

Balaenoptera musculus

Musculus means
 muscle or little mouse
 (a joke by Linnaeus?) So
 enormous, we can weigh
 them only cut in pieces.

Suborder: *Mysticeti*

*We do not know the true nature
 of the entity we are destroying.*
 They swim in pairs, breeding grounds
 unknown. Calves guzzle 100 gallons
 of milk, gain 200 pounds a day.

Ancient sea monsters

No predators
but ship crash and sonar,
drilling and plastic trash, toxins
concentrated in their rich milk
that poison their calves.

Leviathan

whose deep rumblings travel hundreds of miles underwater,
so low we feel as much as hear them,
four-note songs like humpback whales'.
No one knows what they're singing,
maybe warnings, elegies, calling their names.

WORLD'S TINIEST TARANTULA

(Microhexura montivaga)

Small as a BB, hidden
 under emerald moss on rocks,
 eating springtails in funnel-like webs,
 the Spruce-fir Moss Spider lives

high up in the Great Smokey
 Mountains. Their moss is drying out,
 their ancient forests skeletonized
 by an invader from Europe,

the Woolly Adelgid. Who wants to save
 the tarantulas? Who even knows these exist?
 What little I knew of tarantulas came
 from Dr. No, the first James Bond film

we saw at the mall one Christmas.
 Sean Connery's arachnophobia impressed me
 as much as Ursula Andress rising from the sea
 in a white bikini did my dad and brother.

In a black bikini in the Bahamas
 the first time I saw a live tarantula
 I screamed. Our landlord, Errol
 Symonette, laughed and picked it up

gently, *Monkey-faced Spider won't hurt you.*
 The way the local diving boys
 laughed at our fear of sharks,
You just punch 'em in the nose,

we laughed at their fear
 of walking down the street
 in New York. *Don't you get shot?*

No. We have met Dr. No,
 and he is us.

BUMBLEBEE BAT

(*Craseonycteris thonglongyai*)

Rumors of trouble in the hinterlands.
Kitti Thonglongya, author of *Bats*

and *Bats' Parasites of Thailand*,
dropped from a heart attack.

Other species he'd discovered
(Salim Ali's fruit bat &

the white-eyed river martin) may
already be extinct. Kitti's Hog-nosed

Bats, named in memoriam, might
live a decade each, the lone survivors

of the family he discovered
& tried to save, *Craseonycteridae*,

that stretches back thirty-three million years.
No bigger than bumblebees, they fly

at dawn & dusk, to feed half an hour
in the tops of bamboo groves.

Otherwise they roost up high, deep inside
limestone caves along rivers in Thailand

and Myanmar, in a state of torpor.
Do they dream? With their piggy snouts,

big ears, tiny eyes hidden in fur,
they seem creatures from a dream.

They have thumbs with claws
& uropatagium, webbed hind legs.

Mini-copters, they hover. The smallest
mammal, they weigh less than a penny.

She bears a single pup a year, latched
to her nipple when she hunts, or left

behind in one of forty-odd caves.
The usual threats, plus tourists, Buddhist

monks burning incense while meditating
& junkies hiding for a fix in their caves.

When I visited Myanmar, still Burma
then, so hot I was in torpor too,

I staggered under a parasol from stupa
to stupa, trapped on the tourist trail.

CACTUS FERRUGINOUS PYGMY-OWL

(Glaucidium brasilianum cactorum)

There are still a few left
 Owls the size of bluebirds
 Owls that fit in the palm of your hand

Owls with eyes on the back of their head
 false eyes of darker feathers to fool
 raccoons Cooper's hawks bullsnakes

Owls of the wild Sonoran Desert

Owl eyes a hundred times more
 sensitive than ours

Owls hear the delicate anklets
 on the feet of insects as they walk

Owls perch in mesquite thickets pounce
 on scorpions lizards rats twice their size

Owls signify wisdom and magic
 bring good luck

Owls all but gone from Arizona

Near the Texas border cactus ferruginous
 pygmy-owls still cruise four
 and a half feet above the ground

The Wall—

construction roads
 lights noise separation
 from their Mexican kin

all—

will do them in.

THE LAST JAGUAR

(Panthera onca)

The Jaguar God of the Night

Lord of the Underworld.

The last jaguar in Texas

shot in 1948, the last

female jaguar in the US

shot the same year as JFK.

Schoolkids in Tuscon named

the last jaguar standing

El Jefe

The Boss.

He prowls

the Santa Rita Mountains

an immigrant from the Sierra Madre.

The last jaguar before him

Macho B

lured with female scat

killed in a botch-job in 2009.

Two centuries ago

Thomas Jefferson

recorded the jaguar

an American animal.

Two thousand centuries ago

jaguars came from Asia

when dire wolves

saber-toothed cats

and mammoths roamed.

Two hundred centuries ago

people followed them across

the Bering Land Bridge.

In Mexican Spanish
the jaguar is *el tigre*.

Jaguar comes
from the native *yaguar*
he who kills with one leap.

Peerless at ambush, jaguars
can bite through skulls, leap
into water onto crocodiles
haul cows up trees.

Jaguars avoid
& rarely attack
us
unlike their old-world
relations—lions, tigers, 'pards.

Solitary.
Elusive.
Their rosettes help them
disappear
in dappled
deep-forest light.

Hard to spot
let alone count.

El Jefe can be known
by his unique coat.

Where jaguars once roamed
the southwest freely
El Jefe hunts alone.

The Wall will keep females out,
making

El Jefe the very last.

The Ese Ejja

People of the Amazon say

The Jaguar

only shows himself to you

when you are ready to see him.

WILD LIFE

(Ursus maritimus)

Go out to scatter bread crumbs
for the birds, see the snout
of a polar bear sticking
out of the snow—I'm standing

on its back! & there's another
beside it, & another—
seven in a row, no,
three rows of seven—

twenty-one polar bears
tucked under the snow
asleep side by side
filling the whole back yard

like blintzes in a pan
or stepping stones
I could hop across
to the end of the world

BETTER THAN POLAR BEARS

The Old Norse called them *White Sea Deer*, *Rider of Icebergs*, *The Seal's Dread*, *The Whale's Bane*, *Sailor of the Floe*. Sea Bear, in Latin *Ursus Maritimus*, *Thalactos* in Greek.

Isbjorn, Ice Bear, in Norway and Denmark, The White Bear in Russia, *Beliy Medved*. Animal Worthy of Great Respect, *Nanuk*, among the Inuit. Also

Pibogahiak, Ever-Wandering One. Grandfather, *Gyp*, or Stepfather, *Orgoi*, to the Ket of Siberia. *Tornassuk*,

Master of Helping Spirits in Greenland. *The Old Man in the Fur Cloak* the Sami and Lapp call them. Also, *God's Dog*.

EL ZUNZUNCITO

(Cuban Bee Hummingbird, *Mellisuga helenae*)

...there always exists one more beyond in the marvelous works of creation.
—Juan Lembeye, *Los aves de la isla de Cuba*, 1850.

The smallest bird lives on nectar,
named *zunzun* for the whirl

of its wings, which
invisibly trace infinity.

Also *zumbite* (buzzer)
or *trovador* (troubadour).

Co-evolved with flowers,
lime to sapphire,

they can mate shimmering in mid-air.
In spring *el macho's*

head and neck grow brilliant
pink-orange-reds. He joins

a lek, a band or team
that sings and competes in

intricate displays, in hoodies
like iridescent lipsticks.

Each female a prom queen
can hook up

with several *machos*.
She'll still end up a single mom.

Fed on orchids and sarsaparilla,
she builds her cup-shaped nest alone

(so tiny, it can fit on a clothespin)
in calabash or cashew tree.

She gathers wool from ceiba
trees or twisted airplant,

lined with moss, down, fur.
Spider web for spandex.

She lays two eggs like white
coffee beans. Her blue-green

plumage blends in; *el macho's*
gaud could give away the nest

to hawks, falcons,
even spiders. The chicks

hatch blind. Naked red
turns gold, then dull

velvet with a cobalt sheen.
For protein, she hunts

mosquitoes the way hawks
do pigeons, thousands a day

till the two-inch
pichones have fledged.

Back on her liquid diet
(she weighs less than a dime)

she sips a thousand blossoms
a day of hummingbird or fire

bush, Cup of Gold or Chalice
Vine. Birds so beautiful

in the nineteenth century rich women
wore them, stuffed, on their hats.

WEIGHT

Having measured life on Earth,
we're found wanting—humans a mere
hundredth of a hundredth of the living.

Life proves to be mostly trees.
Only a hundredth in the seven seas.
One-eighth buried—bacteria! Underground

more than a thousand times more bacteria than us.
Even worms outweigh us, three to one.
So does the lowly virus.

Yet we have paved the earth with chicken-bones.
Weep into your soup: under a third of birds
fly free—the rest, poultry.

Garden turned feedlot
& slaughterhouse—*Homo sapiens*, one-third
of all mammals, keep

almost two-thirds to eat, mostly cow
& pig. Only 4% left
for all wild creatures, elephant to mouse.

Half Earth's creatures
have vanished in the last half century
while we've re-doubled.

Even half-gone, plants outweigh us
seventy-five hundred to one.
May they survive the plague of us.

4 %

I let the cat out

I felt the cat
I shit you not
hunkered in her fur
eyes bright in the dark

with all the wild animals
crouched in their night
tygers to mice
the remnant left

waiting for us to decide

SYRIA HOMEWORK

(Syrian camel, *Camelus moreli*)

Are you an American?
 Can you find Syria on a map?
 What is the capital of Syria?

Do you know what language Syrians speak
 or how they say Please?
 Can you please explain who is fighting there and why?
 Can you find Iran on a map? Afghanistan?

Do Syrians descend from the Assyrians?
 Does Jehovah still want us to wipe out
 all the other nations
 down to their animals
 and sow the ground with salt?
 Did Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount in Syria?

How old is Damascus?
 Why is it called the Fragrant or Jasmine City?
 Was the Garden of Eden in Syria?

Who invented the cannon in *Paradise Lost* ?
 Do you believe Satan also conjured drones?
 Agent Orange? White Phosphorus?

Can you find Hiroshima or Nagasaki on a map?
 Can you find Korea?
 Vietnam? Cambodia? Iraq?

What do they eat in Syria?
 Do they still grow dates and figs?
 Are there any camels left?

Can you recite any of the Beatitudes?
 The Golden Rule?
 Do you think Syria should bomb us to liberate us?
 Why or why not?

LONESOMEST GEORGE

(Achatinella apexfulva)

How to sing the loneliness of George,
last of his kind, bred and dead in a lab
in Hawaii, extinction capital of the world?

A hermit who rarely emerged from his shell.

What for? No forest,
no one to mate with,
till he died of old age.
14 years in solitary.

People used to walk up the hill
shaking trees, collecting bucketsful
clustered thick as berries.

In the 30s Japanese brought in
giant African land snails as pets:
a foot long, they ate everything.

In the 50s, the rosy wolfsnail
brought from Florida to eat the giant snails
preferred the 750 native kinds instead.

*Hawaii was the most magical spot on Earth
with beautiful, rainbow-colored snails hanging from the trees,
said Melissa, molecular ecologist.
This entire group is about to fall
off the face of the planet.*

*We've all broken down and cried in the field,
said David, the last to see 20 kinds in the wild.
He started the love shack,
a captive breeding program in a trailer
where George ended his days
alone in his terrarium*

surrounded by 2,000 other snails on the brink.
Hermaphroditic, some snails can reproduce
solo, but not George.

Named for Lonesome George,
the last Pinta Island tortoise.

In native legend tree snails are revered
as the voice of the forest.

No one now can remember how to hear them.

RHINOCHEMAERA

(*Rhinochimaera africana, atlantica, & pacifica*)

Chimaeras (marine monsters in Greek)
 have the best names—
 spookfish rabbit fish ghost shark

rat fish—rhinochimaera adds Greek
 for nose—spearnose
 paddlenose straightnose knifenose

Streamlined like their nearest kin, sharks, but
 oviparous
 & more ethereal rhino-

chimaera *find refuge at depth*
 beyond our nets
 weirder than aliens—like

the lovechild of Dumbo & a shark
 one swims ghost-white
 out of the black ocean depths

appearing to fly through a night sky
 with elegant
 black-edged fins flapping like wings

huge dark eyes & long conical snout
 upcurled feeling
 for fish a sensitive trunk—

conducting their lives in the unknown
 darkest reaches
 of Earth's mysterious womb

DUMBO OCTOPUS

(Grimpotheutis)

Dumbos are bellshaped, semi-translucent, with huge eyes & fins like elephant ears they flap to move with peculiar grace.

Or hover above the deep sea floor with webbed tentacles, resembling small umbrellas. Startled, they can invert like umbrellas blown inside out.

Also called winged octopus or jellyhead, Dumbos come in white, pink, red, yellow, some very delicate, some with blue ear-fins, one like a sea jelly with a giant brown walking shoe.

All live in the abyssal depths, almost blind. The deep so vast & Dumbos so rare, she's always ready, with eggs at various stages. If she gets lucky,

his protruberance on one tentacle ejaculates into her mantle a sperm packet she can store for later. She lays her eggs under small rocks or shells, and fin-swims away.

Octopuses can defend themselves at birth from sharks and killer whales. Octopuses the only invertebrates who sleep like us, who dream and learn.

What do they dream?

They see only bioluminescence.

What do they learn?

When our craft descend to their depths, can they
even perceive us? They're not threatened.

Yet.

GODZILLA V.S. NOMURA

(Nemopilema nomurai)

Jellyfish are taking over the world:
moon jellies, lion's manes,
sea walnuts, snotties,
blubbers, agua mala.

We've eaten all the creatures
that used to eat them.
We've heated the ocean,
filled it with oil rigs &
trash for them to grow on.
We've made dead zones
where nothing can breathe
and they alone bloom.
We've shipped them
in ballast water to every port.

They're swarming beaches in Spain,
clogging nuclear reactors in Sweden,
stinging tourists from Brazil to Israel,
killing in Australia and the Phillipines,
invading the Black Sea & wiping out sturgeon,
destroying fishing nets & catch in Japan
where they overturned a ten-ton trawler.

Off South Africa, they've hung
a curtain of death: instead of anchovies,
30,000 square miles of stinging slime.

China's runoff causes blooms
of giant pink Nomura's jellyfish
which grow from a grain of rice to the size
of a washing machine in six months,
each female releasing a billion eggs a day.
Each egg hatches a larva that attaches
to the sea floor and grows a colony

of polyps, like anemone, which bud
into medusae that free-swim off
to eat, spawn, and repeat a billion times.

They aren't fish, but more *like aliens*
says Dr. Shin-ichi Uye of Hiroshima U.
Jellyfish have no words, but act as messenger;
we have to learn to listen to their voiceless voice.

APRIL JOURNAL 2018

Saddest spring on record

A young sperm whale washed up
 near a lighthouse in Cabo de Palos
 sixty-four pounds of garbage in its gut
 trashbags fishing net ropes & a drum

Winter will not let go its hold

David Buckel environmental lawyer
 self-immolated in Prospect Park
 undrinkable brew of courage & despair

World white when I woke but melting

The Vietnamese monk set himself on fire
 on TV again sat utterly still
 did not cry out certain
 of reincarnation as we were of gravity

Blizzard in Minneapolis

Another day in the march of ecocide
 Sam Hamill used to post
 People mostly looked away
 How to think the unthinkable

122.3 in Nawabshah

Though living in the end days
 with thirteen kinds of crazy
 still the birds return one by one

SUDAN'S VOICE

(Ceratotherium simum cottoni)

Jemu Mwenda cares
 for Najin and Fatu
 mother and daughter
 northern white rhinos
 (Sudan, the last male
 died last year)

*The greatest weight—
 waking up
 looking into
 the eyes of these two*

*I can tell
 that they feel
 they are the last
 of their kind*

*Extinction looks so far away
 but we witness it
 every day, feel it
 through these animals*

*We hope
 that in vitro
 will save them
 resurrect Sudan*

*Sudan's death
 was an inspiration
 I made a promise
 to be his voice*

*to save the butterflies
 insects trees going
 extinct every day
 without being noticed*

THE OWL GUY

Good news! There are men
who stop for wounded owls
who track them into the woods
who cradle them in their Carhartt jackets
till the wildlife guy arrives.

Men who work a 12-hour shift
drive home bone-tired at 6 a.m.—
no time to brake for the hurt owl
miraculously centered between the pickup's wheels.

I'm the owl guy at work now, Chance said.

Released three weeks later, the barred owl
ignored his *What's up, buddy?*
and took off from a Walmart parking lot
back to its realm of sky over Waterford.

TRACE

Late, you swim along the lake's eastern shore.
Low sun glances off the dancing surface,
ripples silver across gray bark and wavers
over the hemlocks like green-gold smoke.

Do your strokes disturb the current, casting
these intricate patterns as on a screen?
Or would light and water weave just the same
if no one were here to see? You can't know.

You glide by, steadily and slow, watching
what seems to be the work of your own hands—
you think that you are the star of this
ephemeral light-show. You will never

be sure you're not just a water strider
skimming past without a trace ...

NOTES

The sources for many of these poems are the EDGE Lists (of Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered species).

“Average Monkey” ends with a quote from Mu Soeng’s book on *The Heart Sutra*.

“Calling Blue Whales” quotes Herman Melville and Arthur C. Clarke.

“Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl” adapts a line from *The Kabir Book* by Robert Bly.

“Weight” and “4%” are derived from “The biomass distribution on Earth,” Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips, and Ron Milo, *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States)*, June 19, 2018.

“Lonesomest George” is from “‘Voice of the Forest’: George the snail, last of his kind, dies at age 14,” *The Guardian*, January 8, 2019.

“Sudan’s Voice” is from “Interview: This Man is Caring for the Last Two Northern White Rhinos on Earth,” Kelly Richman-Abdou with James (Jemu) Mwenda, *My Modern Met*, June 15, 2019.

“The Owl Guy” is from “Rescued owl returns to sky over Waterford,” *Albany Times Union*, January 2, 2019.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the editors for publishing the following:

“Syrian Homework,” *Gargoyle*

“The Last Jaguar” and “Lonesomest George,” *New Millennium*

“El Zunzuncito,” *Peaceful Dumpling*

“Trace,” *Poetry Leaves*

Barbara Ungar's fifth book, *Save Our Ship*, winner of the Richard Snyder Memorial Prize from Ashland Poetry Press, was named to *Kirkus Reviews'* Best Books of 2019 and won a Benjamin Franklin award in the Independent Book Publishers Awards. Prior books include *Immortal Medusa*, named to *Kirkus Reviews'* Best Books of 2015; *Charlotte Brontë, You Ruined My Life; Thrift*; and *The Origin of the Milky Way*, which won the Gival Prize and a silver medal in the Independent Publishers Book Awards. A professor at the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY, she lives in Saratoga Springs.

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