Roadside Picnics

Encounters with the Uncanny

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Let Not Bygones Go By
Céline Baumann

In the spring of 2019, the UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released a shattering summary of their Global Assessment Report, outlining the extent of anthropogenic environmental impact over the last fifty years. In summary and because such a report reinforces the dramatic bleakness of the planet's current state: 82% of wild mammal biomass has in the last half-century been lost, and at threat of extinction currently are 40% of amphibian life, 30% of corals, and marine animals, and 10% of all insects. One million species face annihilation within decades—a time of trouble lies ahead.

The same spring, *La Biennale di Venezia* launched the 58th International Art Exhibition titled *May You Live In Interesting Times*. In the show many artists chose to reflect on the Anthropocene, tackling topics ranging from climate change to the bleaching of coral reefs. A notable artwork conceived by the artist Dane Mitchell set the focus on decay and its persisting traces, investigating the two-sided histories of evolution and extinction, progress and obsolescence. This audio installation gathered what the artist called a "poetry of the bygones," namely a list of things and beings that no longer exist. The enumeration included extinct plants, fossilised mammals, dried-up lakes, demolished buildings, commercially discontinued perfume fragrances, banned political parties, collapsed ecosystems, failed companies, phantom islands and past geological ages, amongst many more. The litany of collected natural

and anthropogenic losses was so long, that it would run daily during the six months of the exhibition without any single item repeating. Distinctions between nature and culture were here dismissed, as the two types of loss were woven into one narrative.

The work of Mitchell gives a snapshot of the magnitude of what has already vanished. As new losses pile up daily, and as one listens to the sounds of this inventory, it sounds sadly as the announcement of more losses yet to come. The vertiginous character of the list prompts the question of whether planetary systems are past beyond the threshold when the harm caused is no longer reversible. Also, it prompts to wonder what can be learned from remembering bygones and not letting the extinct go by?

A Tipsy Waggle Dance

"*There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.*

On the farms the hens brooded, but no chicks hatched. The farmers complained that they were unable to raise any pigs the litters were small and the young survived only a few days. The

apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit."

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962)

The disappearance of living beings was already being depicted in an era taking place even before the time-span covered by the IPBES report and affecting in great part the "thread that leads life to life"—namely insects, in Carson's beautiful prose. Although they might not immediately inspire warm and fuzzy feelings and might lack the cuteness effect that other animals inspire, bugs comprise more than 70% of all living species. Albeit our daily coexistence with them is sometimes irritating, in their extreme diversity, insects are completely indispensable for Earth's ecosystems. This makes the rapid reduction of their buzzing and humming swarms symptomatic of the collapse of wider webs of life. Not long ago it was common to observe splashed bodies of flies, mosquitos, butterflies, and other wasps forming stains of different sizes and colours on the windscreen of a car whizzing along a countryside road. Now the windscreen shines pristine, save for the polluting dust that accrues from exhausts. The insect kingdom is primarily affected by the massive use of pesticides, an inherent companion to industrialised agriculture only. With pesticides there is no coexisting. As a result the natural habitat of insects shrinks: what is left are thus only island-like shapes of habitat, which are wholly inadequate as an ecosystem form.

Pollination is an ecological process vital for the production of fruits and seeds, an exemplary model of species' interplay. In temperate climates, 80% of all species of flowering plants are dependent on insects. Without bees, flies, beetles or ants, most plants wouldn't reproduce, resulting in the correlated disappearance of many fruits, vegetables and flowers. To be an efficient pollinator, an insect must visit several flowers of the same species in succession, carrying enough pollen to allow for genetic mingling. Bees for instance, forage large quantities of pollen and nectar not only to feed themselves but also to nourish the rest of their colony. They, therefore, need to visit comparatively more flowers than other nectar-feeding insects and are thus more exposed to direct and residual contacts with agro-industrial chemicals. Pesticides, albeit not targeting bees, induce strong collateral damage by impacting social behaviours which are fundamental for the cohesion of their colonies. Neuro-active pesticides like neonicotinoids impair bees' navigation system, leading them to shift to the wrong angle during the waggle dance —a communicative whirl whereby forager bees reveal food sources to worker bees—thereby resulting in ineffective wandering and eventual collapse of the colony due to starvation.

Some flowers have developed notably refined features to charm and dupe their favoured pollinators. This is the case of the orchids of the genus *Ophrys*, a perennial herbaceous plant that has developed a large petal-like organ mimicking the shape of insects.

There are several types of plants in the same family able to mimic either a spider, a fly, or a bee with extraordinary accuracy. One may speculate whether, in the near future, this orchid will need to evolve to mimic the shape of a different kind of creature to be able to survive? Assuming evolution can at all keep up with the unprecedented pace of human damage on Earth, of course.

Of Non-Human and Human Pollinators

Massive loss of pollinators and resulting crop disruption has been observed in various parts of the world in the last five decades. Although we stubbornly refuse to acknowledge it, the collective failure of the 'Green Revolution' with its cohort of agrochemicals, patented seeds, industrial fertilizers, greenhouse gas emissions and environmental damage has been greatly causing it. As is all too often the case, indigenous communities suffer greatly from problems cooked up in modern, capitalist, mostly western societies. Lack of information combined with a shortage of resources and the aggressive pressures of multinational companies, make indigenous communities and their cared-for ecosystems especially vulnerable. The story recounted below takes place in the highlands of the Hindu-Kush or Western Himalayas. This area, encompassing Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, and China is composed of a complex mosaic of overlaying landscapes of various elevations, shaping a range of habitats for a

bounty of life forms and livelihoods. This great diversity however, characteristic of mountain regions and their ecosystem-fragility, renders it highly sensitive to any slight disturbances.

Apples are here the traditionally grown fruit tree. The fruit in fact originates from the high plateaux of Central Asia and can be cultivated at a height of up to 3,000 meters. The specificity of the apple is that most varieties are not self-fertile, meaning that pollen needs to go from one tree to another to form new, seed-scarrying, fruit. The sticky nature of its pollen makes the effects of wind—which might play an important role in other crops—negligible, making bees critical to the fruit life cycle. Apple orchards can bring a substantial income and play an important role in helping farmers in the Western Himalayas to rise out of poverty. Alas, the harvests have decreased considerably in the past decades due to the pesticide-induced retreat of the apple's favourite pollinators, the wild bees. The stark decrease in profitability within the vast region, straining many farmers, has had strong repercussions. The divergence of responses is insightful of the different ways we might react to the unintended consequences of our actions during these new and 'Interesting Times'.

The farmers of the Maoxian, a county in Ngawa Prefecture of the Chinese province of Sichuan, were aware of the importance of wild pollinators and responded singularly by bringing into play their workforce to make up for the loss, creating a new type of craftsmanship, namely human pollination. 'Human

pollinators' collect pollen by hand on every flower of a single tree, able to pollinate between five to ten other trees daily. The operation requires a high number of labourers, as the flowers of plantations need to be handled within five days of blossoming. The golden yellow dust is then either applied to other apple trees of the same orchard or packaged in little paper bags to be sold to neighbouring plantations. The menial practice could only sustain itself during an economic window in which worker's wages were almost as cheap as bee's labour. This practice was at its peak in the '90s, during which apple trees in the Maoxian were exclusively hand-pollinated. The use of human pollinators decreased eventually thereafter, because of the low efficiency of the practice, the soaring cost of labour of a country modernising at a high pace, a massive exodus from the countryside, not to mention the global decline in apple prices. This led farmers to subsequently replace the apple monoculture with mixed orchards of at least partially self-fertile fruit crops like plum, loquat and walnut. A similar outcome happened in the Balochistan region in Pakistan. This area contributed greatly to the total apple production within the country. During the '80s and '90s, the surface used for apple cultivation increased fivefold, although the crop yield eventually led to disappointing results due to a decrease in pollinators. Many farmers of the region interpreted the decrease of production to changes in weather and pests, and as a response cut their apple trees and moved on to other crops.

In India, farmers of Himachal Pradesh resorted to the use of domesticated honey bees to pollinate the trees. Honeybees work consistently for long hours, have long tongues, coats of long hairs, and the ability to warm themselves to work in cool weather (Himachal Pradesh being the 'Snow-Laden' Province), making them efficient and locally adaptable pollinators. Cross-fertilization of crops by honeybees revealed to be a practical and effective method to even increase harvest yield. The government played a substantial role in that response by creating a regional institutional framework to create and tend to apiaries, renting them to the farmers at a symbolic cost.

The transition from subsistence farming to cash crops had a transformative effect on the Hindu-Kush landscapes and their inhabitants. The intensive orchards cultivation led to the use of pesticide, reducing the number of pollinators, inducing the adoption of even more chemicals in a desperately vicious circle. In the absence of the possibility of easy escape, farmer's strategies to react to such transformations are telling on how innovative those populations are in staying with the trouble. Growing different crops, planting mixed orchards and using honey bees are interesting alternatives, though not always flawless, as honeybees for instance tend to chase away the local wild bee, although arguably not as cruelly as pesticides. They are nevertheless showing encouraging examples of entanglements between people, land and companion species.

Another Fable For Tomorrow

The successive waves of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated feelings of great uncertainty and growing societal challenges. They have, however forcefully, induced some fortuitous effects by providing urban residents with a break from their round-the-clock lifestyles. Springtime lockdowns let citizens in many parts of the world tune to a car-free silence interspersed with birdsong for the first time in decades, the joyful melody of sparrows, doves and other swallows providing a sign of reassurance to distressed citizens. Yet, what has been sometimes described as a sign of nature's great resilience is nothing more than a temporary respite provided by a hiccup in the modern pace of life. How long can urbanites still hope to listen to the birds chanting, hear the insects buzzing and see the flowers budding?

Let's imagine inscribing the protection of the environment in the constitution and fantasize this not remaining a symbolic yet ultimately empty legal-political gesture. Let's imagine Bruno Latour's *Parliament of Things*, a political forum where both humans and non-humans would adequately be represented in one way or another. Let's move further and extend the Rights of Life, Liberty and Security and the Right to Housing, that is of adequate habitats or *Lebensräume* to all living creatures, and even to a certain extent to our natural predators the viruses. Let us actively look for the next ten, fifteen, twenty years for a new fable of coexistence, a designed Utopia, and through our imagination

and work arrive at an economics that does not absurdly externalise nature and agriculture, that does not rapidly deplete our soil, water and indeed related ecosystems. Let's rebel against extinction, through imagination and political agency. It is, in the end, up to us in the West to halt our own negligence.

Let's imagine a forthcoming spring presenting an updated version of Mitchell's work giving a chance to co-evolution and brainstorm what would be the extra entries added. I nominate to bygone status the following: neonicotinoids, fishing trawlers, Roundup and many related products, Monsanto-Bayer, polyvinyl chloride and its various petrochemical derivatives, GATT, WTO, OPEC, biofuel, carbon sequestration schemes, fracking, driverless trucks, lab-grown burgers, GMO, …

Orchids from the Ophrys family, from *The Flowering Plants, Grasses, Sedges and Ferns of Great Britain*, Volume III, by Anne Pratt (1873). King's College London, Foyle Special Collections Library / Archive.org

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