

Sarah Doerfel

taking back my goodbye Thoughts on the island's ecological clockwork

This text was written in the process of the exhibition “taking back my goodbye” on the spring residency at Ventnor Botanic Garden on the Isle of Wight, UK, 2022.



(2) Pic by Isle of Wight Council, 2014



(3) left: Compton Bay, 2022

(4) right: Costal walk from Ventnor to Benchurch, 2022



(5) left: Strata at Compton Bay, 2022

(6) middle: Public bench at Freshwater, 2022

(7) right: Snails on fossil rocks, 2022



(8) & (9) Dodo and humans, 2022

Moving Grounds

John, the director of the Botanic Garden, takes us to a place in the neighbourhood where we could see the effects of landslips on the life of the island residents. We drive westwards along the street past the Garden. Undercliff Drive, a well-maintained road, is lined with Victorian villas and holiday homes, flowering gardens with a prime ocean view. All of a sudden, the road ends in a jungle of bushes and trees, the marking suggesting it was originally going further. In 2014, this was the site of a landslide that changed the surrounding villages' life until today. I am told and would later observe myself that landslips mostly announce themselves in the form of cracks in streets or the soil. Road maintenance staff is keeping a close eye on the cracks, measuring how fast they grow, often shutting down roads, coastal hiking paths and evacuating homes before slides take place. Also, houses at Undercliff Drive were evacuated and families saved their belongings (2). When the road had finally slipped and the ground stopped its movement, one family couldn't return to their home, the damaged house had to be torn down. What was left of the crumbled up road was closed and fenced off, interrupting the busy main connection between the nearby villages. Undercliff Drive used to be a route used by tourists to circle the island by car and brought a steady amount of passersby to local pubs, shops and the Botanic Garden in Ventnor. Since the slip, visitors numbers dropped and village life became quieter.

Standing at the sudden end of the road, I'm wondering how it feels to live in the other house – the one that didn't have to be torn down, once situated on a busy road, now surrounded by ticket and a footpath. Working in the studio the following week, I meet Tom. He's volunteering in the Botanic Garden and lives in the last house before the landslip area on Undercliff Drive. I ask him if he's afraid to lose his home one day. He says that places always change and nothing ever stays the same anywhere in life, he's not afraid.

What we didn't talk about is the role of climate change. With the climate becoming more extreme, landslips occur more frequently and the process has accelerated. In the past 100 years, 60 properties only in this area of the island were lost to landslides. Heavier storms make waves hit the coast harder, speeding up erosion by hollowing out cliffs that then slip into the ocean, whilst groundwater is pressing upwards. With prolonged rainy episodes, the soil soaks up more water, getting heavier and heavier and more likely to slide.

At Compton Bay, the scenic coastal path is regularly moved inland, fleeing the hungry waves' mouth (3). Here and at many other spots on the island (4), the ocean is literally taking bites off the land, devouring massive blocks of soil, rock, flora, fauna, and human infrastructure. On many beaches we saw pipes from eroded former sewage systems high up on the cliffs, now giving up to new salty residents deep down. But it's not (only) a "force of nature" that is showing here, it's man-made. What I see is the unpredictable reaction of the other part of nature to our wrongdoing. It becomes clear here to me that this process is hard or impossible to halt at this point. As I read in a study on coastal erosion on the island: "Adaption - will be a reality!" What was this coastal spot looking like when I was born, and what will it look like in a thousand years? This night in my shed, I'm thinking of the ground underneath my bed, hoping no cracks have been overlooked. Time warps in this place, and I'm dreaming of dinosaur fossils next to medieval churches and supermarkets on the ground of the ocean.

Anthropocentric Spook

Walking a coastal path along high cliffs on the south side of the island, I find myself in a thick dark tunnel of thorny wild raspberries, several hundred metres long. The plants must be cut back every other week to allow humans and dogs to walk through. These bushes chose the best view of the island: getting all sunshine, all rainwater, the most amazing view over coast and wide open ocean. They keep all of this to themselves, embracing passersby in their dark arms, not granting them a glimpse of their majestic location. This path makes me imagine how

fast local plants could win the island back, overgrow roads and houses, rotting wood and iron down in the salty air. And if I held still for a month or two, I'd be closely wrapped by careful arms in a thorny coat. This thirst for more – more space to grow, access to more water and nutrients, more light to generate energy – seems inherent everywhere I look, but not in the dos- age I'm used to. Resembling a jungle, one that is limitless, relentless, brutal in its thirst to live and succeed in the competition. To the same extent that there are sprouts, flower pods and first roots softly feeling their way, there are entire walls of dried out overgrowth and metre-thick piles of suffocating plants underneath such teeming with life. The scenery shows both sides of thriving life, not hiding the abyss of the Darwinian quality of this process. This is what non-innocent living - life as such - means, seen here condensed in a vegetational zone rich in resources and poor in pollution. No matter how much sunlight, water or nutrients a place may have, there will always be limited space. Space is fought for and many die along the way to just an average existence. It's this reality of life, the inescapability of Haraway's non-innocence, which gives me the shivers when I encounter it consciously in this dense vegetal architecture. It's the fact that we all NEED to eat, breath and mate to live on, but that there's not enough for all of us to "just" live. The shudder lies in the anthropocentric lie, that innocent living was possible. Invented to justify humans' relentless exploitation of all other life forms and natural resources whilst keeping up the highest level of moral self-perception. Honesty about the equality of our intentions and the ones of all other species – to live well and die well – would have made it hard to treat our kins like we did and still do. Brutality in the relentless way of putting yourself first, like humankind has, is what any species does. The pairing of this behaviour with an under- standing of superiority is where the toxicity lies and which we seem to have introduced as a justification. This also blurs the boundary between merely winning a competition between equals and an over-exploitation of today's extent. Being the crown of evolution makes the unthinkable thinkable and renders even extinction morally correct in the face of human needs. It keeps the winner from the humbling, conscious responsibility for the death of others. We don't live in the conception of a world where all animals, including humans, share the basic right to live. This thinking would allow us to feel gratitude for someone else's body dying to secure our own survival. Walking my overgrown coastal path, I see bare life uncovered. Every plant overgrowing another, flowering above wilting leaves, reveals in honesty, that it is not innocent. The doors opened, let them all in, spook me out.

Fossils, Papa

We smell and touch fossils, we break off their moist layers. This is what I'll become if I don't just decompose: compressed organic material. For my dad, who recently died, it was important to slowly become soil instead of burn to ash quickly. Clay is a mixture of organic and mineral material. My dad is one step closer to become this material, transforming into the nutrient or home for new life. Standing in front of some of Earth's past strata at the cliffs of Compton Bay (5), with millions of years being piled up on top of each other about a hundred meters high in front of my eyes, opposite the open ocean and slowly eroding into the water, I see how close I am to him compared to the eons of life's history. His life just ended while mine goes on for a little while, but we're both just a glimpse, considering Earth time. These layers bring me close to him and tell me, how short my life is, how quickly it'll pass before I'm like him, my body is like his. I'll just have to wait and live for a small while before I'm with him again. In stone time, we'll have lived and died basically at the same time.

On this island, every public bench (6), every public path gate and many trees in the Ventnor Botanic Garden come with a commemorative plaque to someone who died. "She adored this view", "Here we spent our happiest hours", "In Loving Memory of Stephen Lyness, aged 3 – as the flowering buds open in spring, so the joy of children's laughter happiness will bring". It's one of the richest spots in fossils in Europe. The beaches and cliffs are covered in rocks showing the outlines of mussels and squids having roamed this ocean hundreds of millions

of years ago, while I see today's sea snails grazing algae from them (7), smacking so loud I can hear them. On the Isle of Wight, time warps and the dead are sitting amongst us, past and present lives mingle.

“Our clocks promise that they can keep us coordinated, that if we plan sensibly, all will take place as it should. The lure of persistent consistency still guiding understandings of how best to act and respond in the face of existential threats. But what if, in this time of extinctions, our hours are muddled, our dates disoriented, our counting confused?”

Michelle Bastian in *Encountering Leatherbacks in Multispecies Knots of Time*

Fossils humble. They revive the notion of a never ceasing life on Earth. When even extinction of a species is part of life and even another mass extinction is the way things have gone before. Looking at Earth's strata, the extinction of a species becomes a single death, besides millions of others. Evolution never stops, these layers tell. Also now, in this very moment, new species are forming, or setting the tracks to form soon, for the 7th mass extinction to clear them away. What stays is soil and fossils, telling countless stories of relationships, encounters, habits, stories of busy places and vast empty planes, stories of unimaginably many lives lived on lower Earth's grounds. It's soothing that in the end we'll just be a quietly resting stratum, like all the others before. After the horror of provoking even our own extinction - with an anthropocentric understanding of the planet as main proof of a limited intelligence and unlimited hubris of the human species. Earth stayed calm while her babies became parasites, putting them into their designated layer as it was always supposed to happen, just earlier.

However, some species survived one or even several mass extinctions, the “living fossils”. Their leaves were eaten by dinosaurs, their roots were home to giant larvae, their ears heard volcanoes erupt, their fins roamed oceans busier than in your wildest dreams. There is hope as long as any life exists, life is resilient. The difficulty now might be, what to hope for.

Museum Encounters

Researching at the Natural History Museum in London, I'm standing in front of a glass vitrine. From inside, a stuffed Passenger Pigeon, a Dodo, a Hawaiian Ou and others are gazing at us passersby with their glass eyes. The label reads their names, adding that the museum used to collect specimens of all creatures, once comprising the most complete collection of living species - now turning into an ever-growing collection of endangered and extinct species. Parents (8) explain to disbelieving children what extinction means, labelling the cause of the tragedy as “us”. Others, who grasp the extent of this notion less, take selfies with the Dodo.

The Passenger Pigeon is extinct today, the supposedly last one dying in 1914. What is it, that I'm looking at, when I see the empty feather costume, the beak, the feet of this dead animal? It's hard to understand, that it's possible to look at the physical body of a species that is extinct, that can't now and can never again be seen alive anywhere - any where. Hundreds of Passenger Pigeons got preserved after they were shot and are displayed in natural history museums and private collections in the Western world, to educate and delight us. I can look at these stuffed specimen, but I won't find a single one that still moves, picking with this beak, walking these feet, flying these wings that I see here. No Passenger Pigeon will ever feel the wind in their wings on their long journey across so many countries again. None will ever hatch again, none will build a nest or land on sand. No other species will ever look up to hear their songs again, their loud noise when migrating in thousands with the seasons. The Passenger Pigeon in front of me has flown its last time as an individual and as a species, as its parents and grandparents, as the first Passenger Pigeon originating thousands of years ago from another pigeon species, as the first and the last one to migrate and see countries and cultures below its wings. This bird is dead, but it's more than dead. Looking at an individual from a species that has died out is, like eternity or empty space, ungraspable in its full meaning. It's

over-death, condensed death. All ancestors are dying again in this individual. These remains are transcending into the death of all Passenger Pigeons, the individual turning into a 'pars pro toto'. It's the eternal loss, the definite end of hope, the end of life in general, a black hole. And for me personally, it's also the final and sharp goodbye to remains of an understanding of nature as an allegory for abundance, wealth and eventually always succeeding over human vanity. The reality of extinction seems to be an ending of the notion that no amount of exploitation could endanger a creature as abundant - and that any species was in its original state, and thus must somehow still be, abundant. No human consciously wanted to eradicate another species. The shooting of this bird itself can be seen as an expression of trust in the overpowering wealth of "nature." How is it possible to become conscious of the fact that a bumble bee species you've regularly seen as a child is now gone for good?

Painkiller: 99.9999 % of all species ever lived are extinct, making extinction a natural process. Extinction has been there before humans, and it is the inevitable end of every species' journey. We're at the beginning of Earth's 6th mass extinction, making it 5 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) full episodes of extinction having already past. Five times most multicellular organisms have died out, five times life had to start over again, sometimes more, sometimes less from scratch, starting a new round of the evolutionary trial and error. Five times the Earth looked different, with different sounds of different animals (if there were any), different smells of different flowers (if there were any), sometimes even different air with a slightly different combination of gases as atmosphere, different shapes of organic material, different communities of symbionts and parasites. However, blocking this relief is the grief caused by the responsibility of humans being the origin of number 6, or at least its speed and earlier onset. Grief carries here the task of awareness work.

"But what the world has lost is not what people mourn. What the world has lost, and what truly matters, is a part of what invents and maintains it as world. The world dies from each absence. (...) The entire universe thinks and feels itself, and each being matters in the fabric of its sensations. (...) When a being is no more, the world narrows all of a sudden, and a part of reality collapses. Each time an existence disappears, it is a piece of the universe of sensations that fades away."

Vinciane Despret in the afterword of *Extinction Studies – Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*

Sarah Doerfel lives and works in Munich and London. Her work tells stories of the shared life and death of different species, in particular of the dynamic character of symbiotic and parasitic relationships. Biological, medical-historical and cultural backgrounds provide the starting point base for bodily physical speculations. The resulting narratives materialize in sculptures, paintings or video works, often accompanied by text or sound. Her works have been shown in Germany and abroad, including Museum Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, DE; Macro Museo, Rome, IT and Kunstverein Munich, DE. Sarah Doerfel received grants from Stiftung Kunstfonds, the Cultural Department of the City of Munich and LfA Förderbank Bayern.