

Terry Craven and Joan Fleming

# AGAINST THE END /

(Joan) Thank you for sending me the extinction lists.

*desert bettong : capricorn rabbit-rat : lesser stick-nest rat :  
broad-cheeked hopping mouse : nevis rice rat* [Terry]

I find them unbearable.

...

Hello how are you we are in the sixth mass extinction.  
We are the only species to be keeping scrupulous track of  
our own willing hurtle towards the end.

What does extinction require of us? You drop a black dot  
on a white page and try to feel the loss.

(J) Reading gives the facts a home in the brain, but what about  
the body? What about the shadow? The shadow we are.

...

(J) It is impossible to be exact about the numbers.

...

[LK Holt] “The darkness is greenish with creation and behaving like particles.”

...

Last night, rats stripped the broad bean plants. Every leaf  
gone. They were already waist-high. This morning, as I sat  
on the back porch drinking feral tea and murmuring the  
name of my life, there was a moment when my vision  
caught. I couldn't trust my eyes. Along the fence where  
there used to be green fruiting, there was now just a row  
of green spikes.

(J)

...

“What obligations do we have to hold open space in the world for other living beings?” [Thom van Dooren]

...  
Black canvas. Starting point:  
writing/scrawling the names from the extinction lists.  
Layers. A concrete covering/grave for them?  
Perhaps. I am not yet sure whether the names will be legible.  
But perhaps I can print them out and have them alongside.  
Yes. [T]

I want to be exact about the numbers. One site says 25 million native birds are killed every year by rats, possums, and stoats.

(J) We say pest. Say pest and sneer. We don't say who brought them.

Dom handles the rat traps gingerly when he sets them, wearing gloves, and smearing peanut butter or ham onto the trigger plate. If they smell our human smell, they will avoid the traps. We have not caught any.

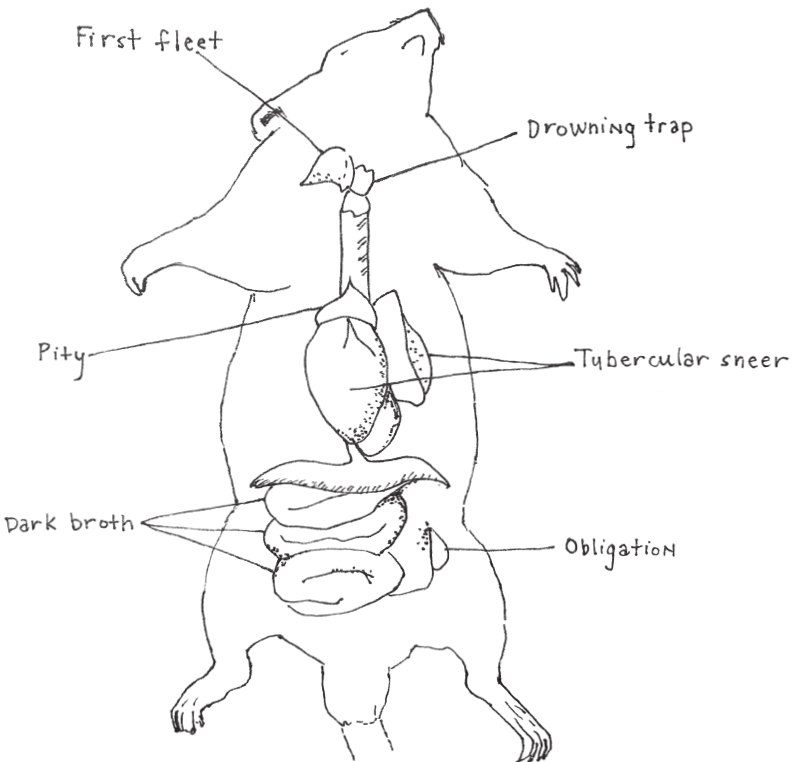
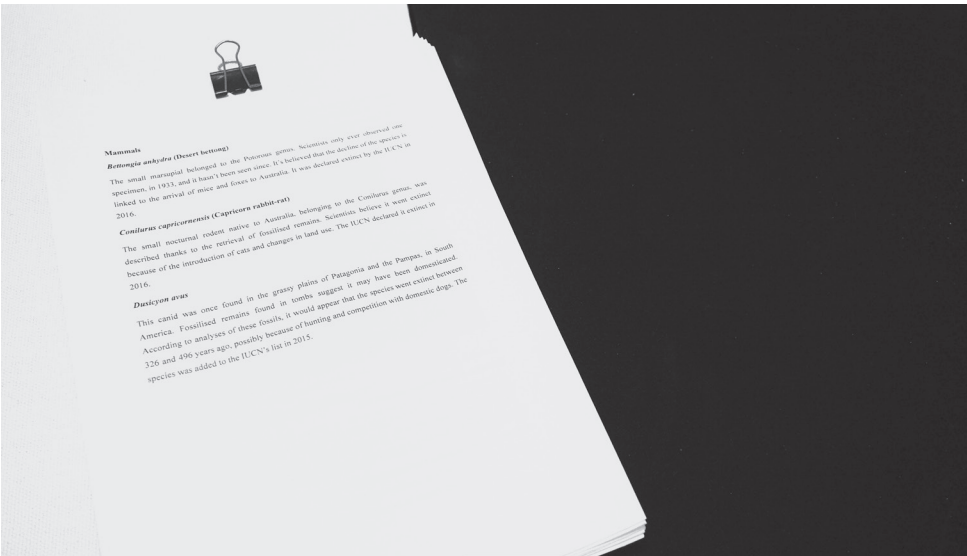
(J) Have you heard about the drowning hope experiment?

...  
If I were to draw this out as an infographic,  
what would each point say of the ending?  
Only the way by which we can (mis)know it? [T]

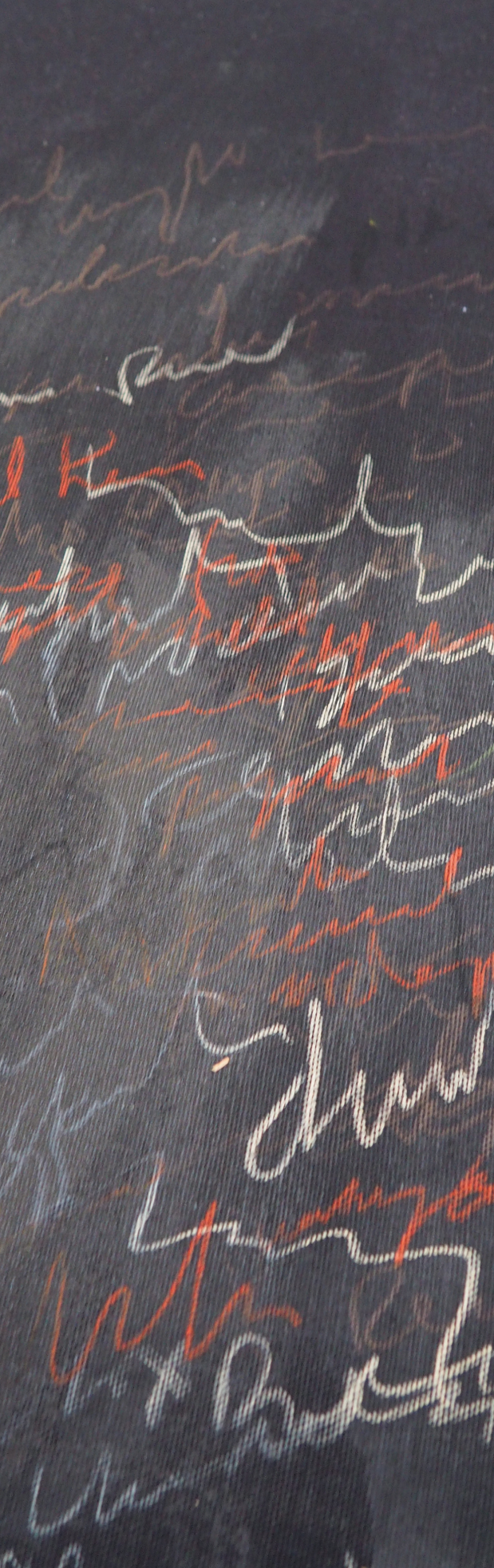
Many historians have argued against the fact that the Dodo became extinct because she was delicious. Poor Dodo. She lived on fallen fruit. So easily captured or beaten with sticks.

The Dutch East India Company is still the largest megacorporation in human history. They dealt in silks, metals, porcelains, soybean, sugarcane, tea, livestock, and human slaves. Hungry sailors. They particularly savoured the Dodo's stomach and breasts. The black rats—accidental on their ships—also preyed on the Dodo, but humans were the apex predator. And we wrote about her. She was the first species whose extinction was conceded, in writing, to be caused by humans.

...  
guam reed-warbler : bermuda saw-whet owl : o'ahu 'akialoa:  
rodrigues blue-pigeon : rinsch's duck [T]







...

Do you know what I mean when I say “thickening”? Is it possible to thicken a page with our not-knowing? Make texture from a loss that is impossible to conceive.

(J) There is something I have been trying to say and I haven’t found a way to say it. I have wanted to write in order to take the fact of these extinctions into my body, because The Great Dithering—this historical moment we’re in—takes its power from its own abstraction. I have wanted to make it real, to take it into my body like a dark broth.

...

*Why watching a documentary like The Anthropocene was like watching science fiction.*

*Can we even understand now, in our bodies, this greater thing, the common?* [T]

...

(J) And I find I like all her names. Black rat, roof rat, ship rat, *rattus rattus*. (Thought loops, thought loops.) It is possible she is not the monster.

...

*Layering black ink on black acrylic on black pastel and I had this strong impulse to add lighter tones, white smears, red names, brown names, green names.*

*Some “beautiful” trace.  
With black on black might a viewer not ask:  
Is there anything there at all?  
Am I not betraying something here?* [T]

...

(J) Dom has made a fresh drowning trap from a Coke bottle strung across the mouth of a bucket filled with water. The Coke bottle gets smeared with peanut butter and when Rat walks onto it, the Coke bottle spins, and she will not hold her balance. He found the instructions online.

...

[Alice Oswald]

“There are so many birds and most of them mean nothing...”

...

*White canvas. Starting point: The black dot.  
Meditation on the extinct for each dot.  
Finding the place in the body.  
Building up. What feeling/s will emerge?  
From the/se feeling/s what line/s?* [T]

...

(J) So this is what Catherine told me. A set of scientists discovered that rats could swim in water for eight minutes, and in the ninth minute, they drown. So the scientists put Rat into the water, let her swim to the edge of drowning, and before the ninth minute they took her out, dried her off, gave her food and water and rest, and then put her back in the bucket. They found that Rat would keep swimming right up to the edge of drowning, again and again she would swim valiantly into the ninth minute, and this was proof that Rat had hope.

...

“Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people—to give them hope—but I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic.”

[Greta Thunberg]

...

This morning the Coke bottle was muddy with prints and activity, but nothing was drowned. No-one was drowned. Rat might have left the peanut butter to Possum, who is too large to drown in a bucket.

(J) Worlds are not containers. They are “**risky co-makings, speculative fabulations.**” For some one surely, the empty bucket is a proof of hope.

...

(J) You know, I was shocked the first time I observed you licking Kitty’s head. Now I think about it all the time: that small gesture towards becoming animal, instead of reducing everything animal to a human mark. **Black dot.**

...

In Aotearoa one often encounters the fact that possums have tuberculosis. It thickens our repulsion, because they strip the bush and blitz the nests and overreach their entanglement in every particular. It must soothe us to think that the possums are sick because they make the land sick. For us, they are dirt: in Lord Chesterfield’s definition, “matter out of place.” If we happen to touch an object a possum has touched, we sanitise our hands.

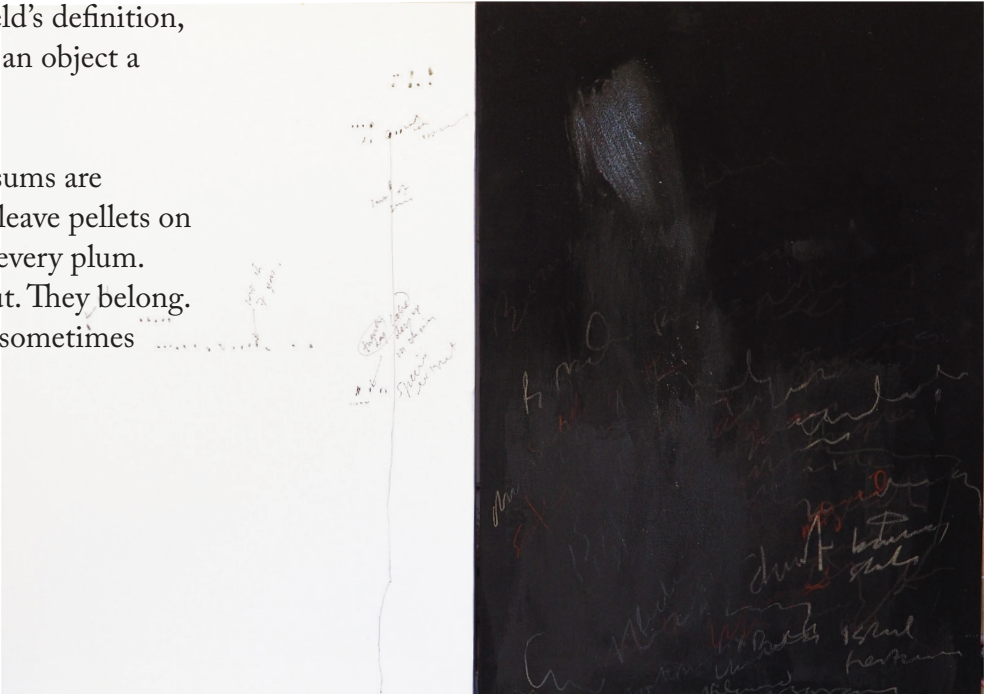
(J) Here on Wurundjeri country, ringtailed possums are original. They run along the powerlines and leave pellets on our drying sheets. They take one bite out of every plum. The Melbourne Zoo wants to fence them out. They belong. They’re a problem. *Psuedocheirus peregrinus*: “sometimes confused with the Black Rat.”

...



[Donna Haraway]

my pest  
my metaphor  
more than good?





*rattus rattus* : generalist omnivore : complex pest : plague  
reservoir : resilient disease vector : famous for the Justinian  
Plague : typically builds a spherical nest : a sampler :  
fine disperser of fungal spore.

(J) In the carrier bag of her blood, the range of disorders she  
can distribute with no harm to herself is astounding.

...

*Binge on dots. Dissolve dot to tongue, dot.*

*Fuck the existence of dot.*

*Make each ending a dot, dot, dot. [T]*

...

If you had to say where power lives in your body, what  
would you say? Hands? Wrists? Head? Root?

If you had to say where craving lives—is it the same place?

(J) In Nichiren Buddhist cosmology, the lower paths are hell,  
hunger, anger, and animality. Heaven is also on the lower  
path because rapture is passive. When I used to smoke, I  
would feel the craving in my wrists and in my jaw. My jaw  
is where I hold the power of a nightmare after waking.

...

*For me the fear retches up from my solar plexus  
to the back of my throat.*

*"Have you tried medication?"*

*I have been asked this so many times. [T]*

...

In last night's nightmare, the afterlife was a kind of  
purgatory where, in petty social groups, we played out our  
worst selves in circles. The only escape was Space. I could  
propel myself into the dust and yaw between the planets,  
and in the dream, there was nothing peaceful or connected  
about that. It was an active terror.

(J) Dom's determination to exterminate grows by the day. It  
feels fucked to be composing-with while not wanting to be  
living-with, as twisted as coddling the dog while feeding  
him pinkish strips of pig meat.

...

*Kick the anti-cockroach spray further under the desk,  
away from the guests. [T]*

...

~~BACK RATTUS LIKE ALL HER NAMES~~  
~~RATTUS RATTUS~~

through doors

IT IS POSSIBLE SHE IS NOT THE MONSTER

Correspondence



What can an egg or a fledgling do against Rat's capacity?  
Rat can go anywhere. She can climb trees.

Only three percent remains untouched.

(J) Our species climbs every tree.

...

*I added too much paint here and now I can't remove it.  
There was a time when, still drying, it would have been  
possible. Now I'm trying to pick it off.*

*Cover it over.*

*The mark is so crude it's painful to look at.  
I appreciate the irony: trying to feel extinction and  
getting hung up on a single painter's mark. Hubris?  
Cognitive dissonance?*

*Underneath lie the erased names. [T]*

...

I have always known my dominant lower path was hunger.  
Endless craving.

(J) Cheap nature is over.

...

*As I work I keep thinking, why are you averting  
your eyes from this?  
What in this can be brought to joy?  
Can happen? Can happen? [T]*

...

Have you heard of this place, Rum Jungle? Australia's first  
major uranium mine, on Malak Malak country. It supplied  
US and British nuclear weapons during the cold war.  
When the pyrite in the waste rock and tailings was exposed  
to air and water, it created radioactive material and acidic  
liquid waste that's been leaching into the river beds since.  
People report seeing thick salt crusts made of heavy metals  
and radionuclides. Pools of water in rich red and aqua green.  
Nothing lives in that water. It was a Malak Malak woman  
who first showed a white prospector named Jack White the  
bright rocks that would bear uranium. 1949, and of course  
there were sacred sites nearby. I read that the punishment  
for the woman's transgression against country was bodily,  
it was taken *into* her body. She contracted leprosy and  
spent her remaining years at the Channel Island leprosarium.  
So Medean, no? The site is still considered culturally  
unsafe. Traditional Owners won't go near it. A big king  
brown snake Dreaming is considered to have been  
(J) activated. Radionuclides as venom.

...





I know we are instruments for catastrophe, but I'm asking about the body because I want to know how we can be instruments *against* catastrophe, and if we can, then perhaps there is a place in the body where the heat for that fight lives.

...

*This might be the most tiring painting project to date.  
If each time I place the black dot I take the loss of a species  
into the body, where I feel it is in the back of my  
throat. Sick. And fatigue. Wanting to switch  
off. Wanting to slip into sleep.*

*The names just keep piling up.*

*I read the reasons for extinction:  
introduction of non-native species / pollution /  
annexing of water for use in agriculture.*

*I don't want to continue.* [T]

...

(J) And if there is, should it be marked?

...

Pitjantjatjara healer/artist Tinpulya Mervyn says that in the old days, wild cats used to attack and kill people. They were at their most dangerous during drought. Feral cats with poison spirits, killing adult humans when the country was sick. Do I believe her?

Do I believe her story of how the heat arrived in her hands?  
Where has reason got us?

Obviously, the droughts are on their way.  
(J) We have armed the earth.

...

**"There are so many birds and most of them mean nothing  
but once or twice a gannet  
from a nest of slovenly seaweed  
hops  
as far as those stones and stops"**

[Alice Oswald]

...





We’ve abandoned the drowning trap, baitless in the backyard. The plastic of the white bucket is so old, it crumbles when I kick it. (I don’t mean to.) Dom has cut away the ivy along the foot of the fence, to minimise habitat.

(J) One of the bean plants Rat stripped to its stalks has sprouted a new head of leaves. There have arrived now more white blossoms.

*Would you believe me if I said that each dot  
was felt as an endling’s death?*  
*Of course not. [T]*

Quotations are from: \_\_\_\_\_

LK Holt, *Capacity*; Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*; Alice Oswald, *Nobody*; Greta Thunberg at Davos in 2019; Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. “The Great Dithering” is also Haraway’s phrase. The Rum Jungle story is from the AIATSIS publication, *The Right to Protect Sites: Indigenous heritage management in the era of native title*, edited by Pamela Faye McGrath. Tinpulya Mervyn’s story is from *Traditional Healers of Central Australia: Ngangkari*.

