

# Hope Against Nature

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**S**ince reading Alison Hawthorne Deming's poem "Science," I have been obsessed with a bird. His name was Orange Band, he died in 1987, and Deming devotes a stanza or so of her work to him. Little Orange Band, you see, was the last of his species. When he died, "the dusky seaside sparrow / became extinct" (31-32). And Robert James Waller, author of the essay "I am Orange Band," muses that "the sound of the word [extinct] is like the single blow of a hammer on cold steel" (115). Orange Band's death carried with it a definitive end, as conclusive and sudden as a dropped coin striking pavement. Individual organisms die every day, but their passings don't carry that sort of finality; some portion of their genes survives them, neatly enclosed in the cells of other members of the species, who will walk or fly above the Earth long after they are gone. They live on unless they are the last, like Orange Band. But Deming suggests a solution, a way to negate this loss. She explains that the little bird's

. . . tissue samples  
lie frozen, in case someday we learn to clone  
one from a few cells. Like those instant dinosaurs  
that come in a gelatin capsule—just add water  
and they inflate. (35-39)

And so Orange Band's genes live on after his death, waiting only for the day that Science—that culmination of higher thinking and reasoning of which we are so proud—can free them from their frozen state, as easily as a child might transform a small capsule into a fully fledged dinosaur figurine. In the future, perhaps the dusky seaside sparrow will make its nest on Merritt Island once more, or at least constitute a fascinating exhibit in zoos all over the world—an extinct species resurrected by humanity's scientific prowess.

Unfortunately, as Deming observes, the future has already come and "what's arrived / isn't what we had in mind" (1-2). She goes on to describe a

metaphorical school science fair featuring representations of the most notable experiments and discoveries of the twentieth century, complete with the “atom smasher” and a whole slew of mice either chloroformed in search of the soul or poisoned by cigarette tar to see “what it took / . . . [to] finish / something as large as life” (20, 8-10, 26-30). Her examples illustrate the destructiveness of Science and segue into her account of Orange Bird with the remark, “I thought of this / because, today, the dusky seaside sparrow / became extinct” (30-32). With these words, Deming establishes a cause and effect relationship between Science and the sparrow’s disappearance. We might one day resurrect the dead, but in the midst of all our pride, we will forget that we are merely attempting to return to life what we took in the first place. This is emphasized by the final stanza of “Science,” in which Deming writes that the first place winner of the science fair, a girl who has concluded that “We’re smart enough . . . / to survive our mistakes,” won “both for science and, I think, in retrospect, for hope” (16-17, 41). Here, hope is a luxury, a luxury we enjoy too much. We can wipe entire species from the face of the planet, so long as we arm ourselves with the conviction that there is no real loss, that Science will fix it for us later.

While this attitude may seem childish and needlessly destructive, it represents the norm of, rather than the exception to, human behavior. Though we have an impressive capacity to look beyond ourselves and our species to consider the needs of other animals, we don’t always engage it. We assume that no lasting harm can come of our actions because we can always say the magic word Science, and our damage will be magically undone. The pride that is intrinsic to this hope blinds us; we overestimate our intelligence and our importance, ranking our small comforts far above nature’s needs. Orange Band and the rest of the dusky seaside sparrows did not need an engineered salvation—they needed only that we left their home alone, that we did not flood their marshes, contaminate their food supply with DDT, or drain the area to build a highway through it.

In his essay “And Such Small Deer,” Garret Keizer describes another kind of prideful hope when he insists that “the oft-professed love of nature, ardent and all-embracing, is the highest form of hubris . . . a claim to see the creatures of this world as only God can see them” (57). “And Such Small Deer” is the story of a man trying to reconcile his own desire to maintain a yard and home—specifically, some privacy bushes and arborvitae trees—in the face of an onslaught of hungry deer. Anyone who’s had a close, consistent interaction with nature knows that it is a struggle. The deer “[start] to look ugly” to Keizer when they persist in the destruction of his trees (60). To assume that

you could endure nature's advances against your property with limitless patience—or find some humane way to stop its attacks once and for all—is to assume that, without experience, you already know everything you need to know. It is pride—hubris—at work. We justify the destruction of nature because our prideful hope for the rebirth of dead species, as seen in Deming's poem, is too tempting, too comforting. We hold onto the misguided belief that nature is some pet to coo over, love and, above all, discipline. Keizer first attempts to protect his bushes by providing the deer with alternate food sources. When that fails, he threatens to kill them. He knows, though, that he would need to kill not just one deer, but every last one of them before they would stop infringing on his territory and consuming his property (60). Nature cannot be disciplined. It cannot even be made to compromise. Keizer says he “know[s] nothing about living in harmony with nature” because “the natural world is hunger itself”; there is no living in harmony with it (59).

During the “Colors of the Wind” section of the film *Pocahontas*, Pocahontas not only runs with deer and sings that “the heron and the otter are [her] friends,” but also picks up a baby bear cub and hands it to John Smith to hold. If Pocahontas can be so buddy-buddy with nature, we think, surely the rest of us can. Then again, Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* paints a different picture—and it doesn't contain “all the colors of the wind” (*Pocahontas*). Released twenty-three months after eccentric filmmaker Timothy Treadwell was killed by one of the grizzly bears he had spent over a decade filming and protecting, *Grizzly Man* uses a combination of Treadwell's own footage and interviews conducted with others during the aftermath of his death to tell the story of a man obsessed with establishing a relationship with nature. Throughout the film, we repeatedly observe Treadwell saying, “Thank you for being my friend” to foxes, bears, and the like; he insists that he “will die for these animals.” If anyone could find a harmony with the natural world, it would be Treadwell, who for months at a time lived alone in the wilderness. But Treadwell died. He died a violent, painful death at the claws of a creature he considered a friend, enforcing Keizer's belief that nature is not something for which a person should declare an “all-embracing” love (57). Treadwell's pride, his hope that the bears really were his friends, misled him—and killed him. His act reflects a delusion about the harmony of nature that bears a striking kinship with that of *Pocahontas* and Keizer.

Near the end of *Grizzly Man*, we hear Herzog's voice over some of Treadwell's footage. He says, “I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos and discord and murder.” This statement is devoid of hope, hubris, and Disney magic, and it's probably true. But it fails

to explain what sort of relationship people should strive to have with nature, if not a harmonious one. “[C]haos and discord and murder” just isn’t acceptable (*Grizzly Man*), especially for a person like Terry Tempest Williams. In her essay “A Shark in the Mind of One Contemplating Wilderness,” Williams reveals a deep awe of nature, an inborn desire to see it appreciated and protected. At the American Museum of Natural History, she “stare[s] at the tiger shark mounted on the wall” and imagines it alive, swimming, hunting, “delivering with great speed its deadly blow.” “I see this shark in motion,” she writes; it entralls her, even in death (42). Her tone is nostalgic as she describes how, as a docent, she once “brought the schoolchildren to this room to lie on their backs, thrilled beyond words as they looked up at this magnificent leviathan [the Blue Whale] who, if alive, with one quick swoosh of its tail would be halfway across Central Park” (44). She rails against the food court that now sprawls across the area under the whale for the same reason she works against the destruction of wilderness; in both cases, people have indicated disinterest when they should be overwhelmed with wonder (44). Herzog’s portrait of constant “chaos” and “murder” doesn’t exactly inspire disinterest, but does lead to detachment and desensitization. He accepts bad things, such as environmental devastation, as commonplace and unavoidable; others accept good things—fantastic things, such as the whale suspended from the ceiling of the Museum of Natural History—as simply okay.

Because the natural world with which Williams concerns herself is true wilderness—areas uninhabited by humans, distant and different from the environment that encroaches upon Keizer’s little house—she has the advantage, or disadvantage, of a detached fascination. She marvels at some of the most interesting inhabitants of the wilderness—whales and sharks, behemoths of the deep—and hopes to preserve their environments, but doesn’t need to change her daily routine. Nature, for Williams, is art as much as life. Damien Hirst’s “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living,” the body of a shark preserved in a great glass box of formaldehyde, elicits a powerful reaction from Williams and inspires her. She finds herself thinking less about the shark than about herself, and wonders how her imagination is “so quickly rearranged to see the suspension of a shark . . . as an image of [her] own mortality” (42). She asks herself, “Why not designate wilderness as an installation of art?” (43). Williams suggests that while the inhabitants of the blue room, the “Blue Whale, the Tiger Shark,” are now “simply decoration,” Hirst’s shark in formaldehyde still has the opportunity to mean something, to call attention to nature’s plight (44). The same could apply to any other aspect of nature designated as conceptual art, either pris-

tine or damaged, “a constellation of monarch butterflies gathered in the mountains of Mexico” or a forest gutted for wood. Williams indicates that the “natural world is becoming invisible,” but “perhaps if we bring art to the discussion of the wild we can create a sensation where people will pay attention to the shock of what has always been here” (44).

Art is Williams’s hope for nature, dangerous as hope may be. Here, absent of hubris, riddled with doubt, it poses much less of a threat. She may not be looking for perfect harmony or perfect anything else, but she wants to believe there is a better approach than washing one’s hands of the problem. By resisting an acceptance of “chaos and discord and murder” as the only kind of relationship that can exist between humans and nature (*Grizzly Man*), she might avoid ushering in an era of Orange Bands—last ones of a species. Waller already cautions that “each day the hammer falls again as another species becomes extinct due to human activity” (115). Williams’s hope has her searching for answers to warnings like Waller’s—presenting her ideas to an audience—and subtly making us aware of the fundamental disinterest that is at the heart of our pride. She does not suggest that readers wait for a solution to appear, or that the solution is just around the corner, neatly gift-wrapped and tied in a bow courtesy of our friend Science. Rather, she indicates that the only solution is a change in our thinking. For this, her hope is positive, unhindered by hubris—the kind of hope people most often think of when they hear the word.

And yet, one wonders: is this sort of hope even possible when dealing with nature, like Keizer, on a day-to-day basis? Keizer’s struggle is constant. “And Such Small Deer” also mentions that ants have invaded his soil. There is no end to any of his battles, short of the complete elimination of the enemy. The opposite of struggle, he says, “is not peace but total war. War is the attempt to end struggle once and for all. Rub out the competition” (60). He seems to indicate that “chaos and discord and murder,” as Herzog says, are unavoidable. Later, however, Keizer tempers his initial statement with further explanation:

. . . the essential human task is not winning the struggle but raising it to the highest possible plane. I believe in chivalry more than in harmony. I believe in loving the enemy more than in peace. If chivalry is dead, so are we. By chivalry I mean a willingness to parley. A disdain for violence against any creature temporarily under one’s thumb. A tendency to rate courage only a little higher than generosity in one’s code of honor. An approach that puts the loveliness and dignity of the means—and what an environmentalist would call the sustainability of the means—on par with and even above their efficacy. (60)

Suddenly, he realizes that the key to an agreeable relationship between humanity and nature lies in the relationships between people. Compromise, avoidance of hostility, kindness—the essential building blocks of human diplomacy, the kinds of strategies that prevent wars—become an environmentalist’s concerns. He sees the possibility of a working rapport.

In “Tools of Statecraft: Diplomacy and War,” Angelo Codevilla writes that “the diplomat’s first task is to figure out whether agreement is possible on the basis of ‘the available terms’—in short, whether both sides’ objectives, though different, are compatible” (par. 7). Keizer believes that the objectives of both humans and nature can be boiled down to hunger. He explains how “connecting the deer’s voraciousness . . . to [his] own yearning for privacy . . . causes a palpable shift in [his] attitude” (59). The deer are literally hungry, and Keizer’s arborvitae trees—planted to satiate his own “hunger” for privacy—provide them with a decent meal. Hunger engenders the inevitable struggle, and the issue, observes Keizer, is less about some abstract notion of harmony and more about “the basic moral conundrum of how to feed the hungry without being eaten oneself” (59). For Keizer, the objectives of each side turn out to be compatible. He puts up a wooden privacy fence, allowing the deer to continue eating the reachable parts of the trees, “hidden like the neighbors from our view” while “the bushy crowns will adorn the top of the fence” (62). He also heads “into the woods to cut down cedar fronds for the deer to eat, to knock down frozen apples that may still be clinging to the trees” (61). Codevilla explains that “diplomacy can make it more comfortable to live with reality by clarifying mutual understanding of it” (par. 6). By holding himself to the standard of chivalry, making a diplomatic effort, Keizer achieves this mutual understanding. He demonstrates a way of interacting with nature that would both make the struggle bearable and “[raise] it to the highest possible plane” (60).

Like Williams, Keizer offers hope—a flawed hope, perhaps, but a positive one devoid of pride. The concept of diplomacy cannot alone salvage the relationship between humans and nature. Keizer warns that “a chivalrous approach to nature is one of great labor, risk, and elegance,” the burden of which is borne by individual people, willing volunteers (61). Diplomacy might foster acceptance—a stalemate—but it cannot eliminate the struggle entirely. Codevilla cautions that “disaster looms when [only] one side follows the rules of accommodation” (par. 7). Nature isn’t as fair as *Pocahontas* might depict; it follows no rules and often seems to act with extraordinary unfairness, as we see in *Grizzly Man*. “[B]eing eaten oneself” is as much a failure of mutuality as never “feed[ing] the hungry” (Keizer 59). Hope exists where

there are people “will[ing] to parley,” willing to perform this balancing act (Keizer 60). The “chivalrous approach” is difficult and “seldom permits victory,” but Keizer adds, “It does admit pleasure,” providing a “more ennobling” option than, say, “a man taking down a deer (even in his head) with a rocket launcher” (61).

If anything, the hope demonstrated by Williams and the hope demonstrated by Keizer go hand-in-hand. It is indeed possible for people to be chivalrous in their day-to-day battles with nature, but it takes admiration, awe, and respect to get there. The pleasure we may take from choosing the harder course, doing the right thing, comes from pride, a deserved pride that acts as positive reinforcement. This elevated chivalry and effectual hope are the only things that could have saved the dusky seaside sparrows, allowing Orange Band to live out his last years surrounded by his kind. We hope that more and more people will choose chivalry, but we don’t just hope. We take just pride in it.

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