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A Flattened Protagonist: Sleep and Environmental Mitigation in Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream*

Abstract: Thinking with contemporary American novelist Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream* (2007), this essay explores sleep as a form of ecological relief and argues that the form of the novel can critically expose the limitations of a "set-aside" approach to environmental conservation. As the protagonist T. loses the ability to sequester personal losses, he pursues co-sleeping opportunities with critically endangered animals both in zoos and in the wild. Through his somnolent form, the novel imagines sustainable and rehabilitative alternatives to traditional character development.

In conservation biology, the set-aside designates a compromise between environmental preservation and economic development. In exchange for setting aside a piece of land, sometimes called a "wildlife corridor," for the protection of a vulnerable or endangered species, the developer is allowed to proceed with her project, be it the extraction of resources from proximate land or the construction of residential or commercial property upon it. Often referred to as "mitigation," this practice requires consultation with scientists who perform studies in order to anticipate and prevent potential negative impacts. The practice is controversial both from the developer's side, because it can be quite costly and cause delays, and from the conservationist's, because even with the very best of environmental intentions it entails habitat destruction, fragmentation, species relocation, and inevitably incomplete information about the threatened species' ability to adapt. Mitigation aims to contain a vulnerable species in order to protect it, but containment comes with its own risks, including the possibility of the species refusing to remain

or being unable to thrive within its newly defined parameters.¹ The logic of the set-aside is fundamentally technocratic insofar as it makes the primary cause of ecological destruction, human intervention, the simultaneous source of its remediation. To set aside is to compartmentalize, to believe, that is, that humanity's expansionist desires and economic ambitions can be accommodated to and cordoned off from a natural world with which they have historically been in tension. Pragmatic and certainly preferable to the type of unchecked development touted by the Trump administration as it slashes environmental regulations at breakneck speed, the set-aside is nevertheless a continued fantasy of human separateness and exceptionalism that fails to reckon with the human's and the nonhuman's fundamental entanglement with the world around them. As the various "new materialisms" and the science from which they draw are teaching us, ecology means complex interconnectedness and interrelation, such that the making of a single environmental ripple inevitably produces changes, often unforeseeable, elsewhere in the system.

To write a novel sensitive to environmental issues is to risk perpetuating the logic of the set-aside by alternating didactic commentary on specific threats to nature with a conventional plot of a character's development and realization. Of course, a nuanced work can render the cultivation of ecological awareness the means by which a character grows into a fuller consciousness of herself. Take, for example, Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), in which Dellarobia Turnbow's education in climate change and monarch butterfly disappearance helps her to recognize the sexist shackles placed on her creativity. But to the extent that the form of such a work maintains a boundary between its protagonist and the degraded environment she

¹ For a rundown of mitigation's limitations with regard to the conservation of kangaroo rats, the species Millet chooses to showcase in the novel, see Tennant et al., who emphasize, five years after the novel's publication, just how precarious relocation schemes can be.

only sometimes visits, it merely mitigates human expansion rather than thoroughly question its viability in the age of the Anthropocene. In other words, a text like Kingsolver's furthers a faith in the capacity of the bildungsroman to accommodate ecological sensitivity, whereas a strand of new materialism such as Timothy Morton's "queer ecology" would likely deem such a faith little more than "cruel optimism," to borrow Lauren Berlant's term, destined to disappoint the natural world and, eventually, the humans and other creatures whose futures are intertwined with and dependent upon it.²

In what follows, I turn to another environmentally attuned contemporary novel, Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream* (2008), whose plot contains a protagonist engaged in a set-aside conservation scheme but whose form gradually works to undermine the possibility of human and animal compartmentalization. I argue that the novel performs an unraveling of species separateness by beginning with ecological set-asides that over time become unsustainable and bleed into the subjectivity of T., an abbreviated central protagonist who by novel's end becomes not so much peripheral to his natural environment as deeply embedded within it. In doing so, I demonstrate the capacity of literary form, not merely storyline, to engage in environmental critique and to envision alternatives to the rapidly deteriorating present. T. becomes a crossroads between human and nonhuman worlds as he increasingly takes an interest in vulnerable creatures, including an aged coyote with which his car collides, the dead body of a girlfriend

² Although recent work in the environmental humanities is rich and varied, it converges in the proposition that humans can no longer be externalized from their environments but must instead be regarded as embedded in them. See, for example, Stacy Alaimo's thinking on exposure as a fundamental and humbling condition of humanity that puts it in constant exchange with other environmental agents such that the environment can no longer be conceptualized as a stable backdrop for heroic human agency. Alaimo's insights are exciting because they emphasize not only the sacrifices—of sovereignty and exceptionalism—that must be made to arrest and abate the violence of the Anthropocene but also the pleasures to be found in growing closer to a host of previously ignored or subordinated nonhuman and nonliving agencies.

killed prematurely by a previously undiagnosed heart condition, a mother retreating into dementia, a friend confined to a wheelchair, and an array of critically endangered and extinct-in-the-wild animals he visits in zoos and other protected locations. In close proximity to these vulnerable creatures, T. recognizes the destructiveness of his selfish individualism and hyper-capitalist ambition—obsessed with money as a child, he grows into a rapacious developer of fragile lands—but rather than use his newfound insight as fodder for his personal development, the novel abandons him to it, rendering him coincidental with a profound precariousness he can no longer set aside.

T.'s coincidence with, abandonment to, and embeddedness in a precarious planet is a situation of danger, to be sure, but the novel frames it as a prolonged rest and as a reprieve from the productive imperatives of capitalist activity and neoliberal self-development. In keeping with its title's inclusion of "dream," the novel links its environmentalist critique with a subtle reevaluation of soporific (in)activity. T. begins his bizarre flight from normative conduct by breaking into zoos, but eventually he wants little more from his illegal intrusions than to sleep in close contact with critically endangered animals, partly as a sympathetic response to their boredom but also as an attenuated expression of a planet exhausted by nonstop human activity. Pursuing Jean Luc-Nancy's observation that the sleeper "coincide(s) with the world" (Nancy 7), I argue that the planet enjoys restorative reprieve only when its creatures rest, meaning these creatures achieve reciprocity with their world and with one another only through the ritualized abeyance sleep requires. To return to sleep, which includes sleeping again and longer but also paying more attention to sleep as a site of ethical inquiry and importance, may be our most overlooked avenue to planetary relief.

Environmental degradation has gone hand in hand with the erosion of sleep, and this is no coincidence. With less time for repose, contemporary populations engage in more unsustainable activity. As Jonathan Crary documents, neoliberalism produces an increasingly “24/7” experience of wakefulness, including longer and irregular work hours, heightened attentiveness to media stimuli, repetitive management of virtual avatars and identities (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.), and the elimination of darkness from urban zones. With insomnia and its pharmaceutical palliatives on the rise, people are struggling to wind down and go under, and this struggle coincides with the difficulty of making do and reproducing life under late capitalism. Lauren Berlant writes of the “slow deaths” endured by the working and nonworking classes in neoliberal economies—for whom life is a protracted period not of thriving but of wearing out to the tune of stagnant shiftwork, endless and unsubsidized caretaking, and the toxic nourishment of cheap fast food—and certainly part of this dilated demise is the increasing unavailability of good rest. Out of joint, these somnambulists both aggravate and symptomize planetary precarity, using unprecedented levels of resources even as they find their own resourcefulness all the more tested and unrewarded.

As sleepless humanity loses its rhythms, circadian and otherwise, it comes to reflect what Dipesh Chakrabarty flags as a hallmark of climate change—the interruption and arrest of the Earth’s natural cycles. Reflecting on the historical and epistemological challenges posed by the concept of the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty notes that the geological impact of anthropogenic carbon production goes beyond extreme weather events (204-205) to include the cessation of weather cycles that, though capable of extreme manifestations, nevertheless provide(d) some temporal predictability to phenomena such as droughts, floods, blizzards, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Warm Christmases, soggy summers, spring cyclones, stationary heat domes,

unyielding fogs; all of these displace the notion of weather as something that can be weathered through faith in seasonality. What if summer never sleeps, rain never rests, and winds never slumber? Nancy wonders “how to sleep in a world without a lullaby, without a lulling refrain,” a question *How the Dead Dream* takes up at extended length, and although Nancy’s bereft reverie does not consider climate change specifically, it invites more than a rhetorical connection between the disappearance of sleep and the waning of the seasons, both dependent upon and now dangerously abandoned by a rhythm no longer discernible.

But the restoration of repose lies at odds with the activity bias of progressive politics and revolutionary praxis. Sleep has a long history of being associated with quietism, ignorance, and complicity. Individuals deemed insufficiently alert to social problems are told to wake up, dreamers (particularly of the diurnal sort) are mocked for having their heads in the clouds rather than the streets, and somnolence is conflated with the thoughtless stupor induced by advertising, television, and other monsters of mass culture. Today people boast about how little sleep they take or need—often while touting exercise and nutrition regimens readying them to work longer and harder—such that extended or intermittent but multiple absences from worldly engagement come to appear not as an essential requirement but as an occasional indulgence or, more frighteningly, as a sign of disability in need of physical and psychological intervention. In the argot of contemporary activism, to demonstrate awareness of privilege and social injustice is to be “woke,” a condition whose constant cultivation and calibration is confirmed by the popular and of course 24/7 Twitter hashtag, #staywoke.

The last thing this essay aims to do is to encourage passivity of the political sort, but it does work with Millet’s novel to probe the underappreciated solidarities to be found in prostration rather than productivity. And these solidarities emerge between creatures in mutual

need of repose and between the individual and a set of social experiences, encounters, and impressions whose digestion and crystallization depend upon the memory-work made possible by sleeping and dreaming. Ostensibly inert and unproductive, sleep is actually the site, research shows, where memory “consolidation” occurs and where long-term memories are made. In sleep, and perhaps also in dreams, the individual incorporates the interactions of the day into enduring consciousness, forging temporal and intimate connections and thereby counteracting, it must be added, the amnesia and individualism threatened by consumer culture’s steady diet of novelty and excitement. Because sleep provides the occasion to process and imprint, it is also the means by which meaning is gleaned and forged; it is a critical scene for interpretive activity too often considered the exclusive property of the waking mind. The point is not to instrumentalize sleep along utilitarian lines—to convert it into one more biometric for neoliberalism to optimize and administer—but to recognize it as a practice every bit as active as those for which it is made to serve, disingenuously, as a foil.

Millet’s novel, an outgrowth of her day job as a conservationist and an extension of her fictional oeuvre’s pursuit of a “macrosocial” subjectivity encompassing “larger mysteries of the world,”³ leverages sleep in the service of a sympathetic bond between T. and an array of vulnerable creatures, but it also reimagines sleep not as a concentrated activity to be set aside for a single chunk of the day—Benjamin Reiss’s recent history of sleep, *Wild Nights*, traces this now standard configuration of sleep to capitalism’s “organization of labor” in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (8)—but as a mode of subjectivity better suited to ameliorating, or at least slowing the rate of, planetary exhaustion. Sleep becomes one of the means by which Millet pauses and slows the growth of her protagonist, flattening both his body and his affect in order to

³ <http://www.identitytheory.com/lydia-millet/>

gradually minimize his impact on a world that simply cannot handle him in full. By the end of the novel, I will demonstrate, T. is brought into radical coincidence with vulnerability, including a threatened tapir for which his foreshortened name could be said to stand, such that the preservation of his distinctive identity is no longer possible, just as it is never possible in states of slumber where we often become other people, inhabit other worlds, and become strange to ourselves even as we lie physically in states of relative inertia. In other words, *How the Dead Dream* questions multiple permutations of set-aside logic in its de-development from bildungsroman to living and sleeping among.

The young T. found in the opening pages of the novel possesses all the aspiration of a bildungsroman's central character. Taking inspiration from founding fathers and successful businessmen, he "[clings] to a vision of forward motion" and "[tells] himself every day of this latent capacity for eminence among humans" (2). Even in college he continues to think of himself as inhabiting a "lucky moment of forwardness" propelled by "the promise of a realized self" (21). Comfortably middle class and lacking for little, T. initially meets with few obstacles on his path to prosperity. He's the consummate capitalist, hoarding his allowance to the absurd degree of carrying coins in his mouth, engaging in shady money-making schemes, and precociously monitoring the stock market. By the time he finishes college, he is already well-off, a figure of self-assured privilege fit for a novel by Ayn Rand. Indeed, Millet could be justly accused of generating a stock character, with a one-dimensionality captured by his initialized name, whose downfall is made totally predictable by his easy ascent to affluence. The narrator offsets this impression only slightly by describing T. as "guilty" of "having private gluts of feeling" and "holding his secrets close" all while "seeming the whitest of the white bread, and of

“being perfectly opaque and seeming transparent” (14). The possibility of interiority is granted but never explored in the opening pages, with the suggestion not simply that T. is a private person who keeps his feelings close to keep others guessing and to gain an upper hand, but that there also is not a tremendous difference between external and internal development. Those “private gluts of feeling” echo the hoarding of capital, establishing an affinity between the possession of wealth and the possession of a unique and individualized self. By denying T. internal complexity, or rather merely hinting at it, the novel both questions the value of, and disrupts the neoliberal ideologies that subtend, a self that is acquired, stored up, and made personable and marketable by its vast reserves of emotional currency. And after a mere thirty-four pages chronicling T.’s “development” from child to adult, in mostly deadpan narration that does not stray far from the superficiality of his attachment to money and success, the novel sets his development aside, a move that both anticipates and mocks his later set-aside scheme, and becomes a tale not of gains but of enervating losses.

Having implanted T. in Los Angeles at the promising beginning of his career as a real estate developer, the novel abruptly shifts, in the opening of its second chapter, to his running over a coyote on a trip to Las Vegas. The experience rattles T.—he drags the injured animal, its legs ruined, out of the road and sits with it as it exhales its final breaths (38)—though he tries to find comfort, reaching back for adolescent memories of similarly gruesome highway scenes, in the fact that while the coyote’s “red insides are all exposed,” his “insides are firmly contained (37).” This thought sequence is again the fantasy of sovereignty, of a self not so much shored as hoarded against its ruin, as if T.’s acquisitiveness has all along been a panicked and preemptive response to the prospect of death. If the dead coyote is T.’s and the novel’s first glimpse of ecological precariousness, it is one they can, with relative ease, set aside, certain of the species’

robustness and suspicious that this unfortunate individual may very well have been aged and approaching death soon anyhow.

And so back to T.'s life the novel turns, but this time with a returning past, in the form of his traumatized mother, that threatens further to arrest the momentum of T.'s forward ambition. Walked out on by T.'s father, she appears unexpectedly and in distress, subsequently moving in with her son and taking over many of his domestic affairs. Another strike against T.'s autonomy, his mother's arrival denies his plan of appearing to have "sprung fully formed from the background of commerce" and loads him with "personal freight" that risks making him seem "childlike" and "beholden" to something that is "frail" rather than robust and developing (45). Here the novel's feminist sensibilities emerge to name vulnerability—particularly the primary vulnerability of the infant's attachment to his mother—as one of the first things humans are taught to set-aside, to sequester from public life and perhaps even to remove from consciousness altogether. T.'s fantasy of emerging from commerce's womb erases the dependency he conflates with weakness and renders personal development synonymous with capital development such that growing up is now entirely a matter of growing one's stock portfolio.

What further intrudes on T.'s delusion of self-sufficiency is the revelation that his father walked out because he realized he was gay and felt as if he had been living a lie. He describes his pre-departure life to T. as a "dream so real it felt like [I was] awake," and he expands this analogy by explaining "I was a ghost. I wasn't really there. It was all, I don't know, some other guy's life I stepped into by mistake" (50-51). Although it is only later, when T. tracks his father down in Key West, that he confirms this obscure confession is a matter of repressed homosexuality, in this early scene he is forced to confront the workings of normativity; compulsory heterosexuality meant his father's life was scripted in advance, prohibiting him from

dreaming his own future and instead conscripting him to appear in someone else's dream—or better, some ideology's dream, where to find oneself in a dream, without understanding how one got there, serves as an adequate description of Althusser's concept of interpellation. Ideology “tricks you into thinking you're wide awake,” to borrow the father's language, an important reminder that wakefulness, or the fact of being awake, should not automatically be deemed the domain of the real ‘you’ or the only state in which progressive or emancipatory activity can take place.

T. must consider the implications of this revelation for his own life—is he also a ghost going through motions made to appear as the fodder of fulfillment?—but most immediately he undergoes a return to his childhood and to a memory, from which he clearly drew psychic sustenance, of his father reading him a bedtime story in a soft and soothing voice. Inside this picture book was “a family of beavers, and they lived in a dam. Inside the dam it was warm and golden, and the beavers ate their dinner at a round wooden table” (51). Comfortably soporific, the picture book stages a scene of nourishment, of actual eating but also of profound care—of an environment sealed off and set aside from danger. His father's voice supplies the rhythm of a lullaby, except now T. realizes that “sitting there on the side of his bed, reading the book about the beavers who were warm in their dam, had been no one” (51). The dam broken, T.'s ensuing relaxation and subsequent sleep may have been tainted, falsely conjured by a pretend father who admits, “I wasn't awake when [your mother] had you” (51). If T. can't trust the conditions of his own sleep, or the sincerity of the lullaby by which he was laid to rest, how can he be certain he is even alive or, perhaps less dramatically, anchored to the world?

Important for understanding this bedtime memory is Benjamin Reiss's point that concentrated sleep is not the only sleep practice specific to western modernity; so too is the

imperative of isolated sleep, the mandate that each person sleep alone all through the night, a practice borne of anxieties about illness and contagion but also of concerns about class status and normative sexuality. Although the nineteenth century fretted terribly about the acts of self-abuse children might perpetrate in their own beds, it worried more about the temptations and sexual educations risked by children sleeping in close proximity with adults and with each other. The “masturbating child” is of course one of Foucault’s four figures of modern sexuality, a problematic social element requiring regulation, investigation, and disciplinary procedures. Amid particular worries that co-sleepers from outside the family, including caretakers, would seduce the child into masturbatory activity, the insulated, or set-aside, nuclear family became “the necessary condition for healthy childhood sexuality” (May 89). And even inside the home of this nuclear family it became increasingly important, particularly for the bourgeois and wealthy classes, that the members sleep individually. Reiss speculates that the demand to sleep alone, which goes against centuries of historical practice as well as evolutionary development, may explain the struggle parents have putting children down for the night and even some forms of adolescent and adult insomnia.

In the memory T. conjures, he would no doubt have had to sleep alone after the conclusion of the beaver tale, but that loneliness is now redoubled, retroactively, by the discovery of his father’s apocryphal and merely apparitional presence. Soon after this distressing discovery, he begins allowing his dog to sleep with him at night, and “in the deepest part of the night he woke up and listened to the dog breathe, the regular pace of the breathing” (54). Now in touch with a lullaby he can trust—his dog tells him no lies about love and safety—“he lay with his arms and legs frozen, imagining paralysis: he tried to feel the gradual freezing, the numbness that crept up into him.” If this imaginative activity, first practiced when he was a child, is a way

of learning to feel and trust sleep, it is also an interspecific identification with the coyote whose legs he paralyzed on the drive to Las Vegas. Becoming a child again, he also becomes the coyote, thanks in part to a co-sleeping dog who provides the background lullaby in which this experimentation is made safe and made part of an animal ecology. In scenes such as this one, the novel works to undermine the logic of the set-aside even as it continues to maintain some separation between T. and the nonhuman world.

Accommodating himself to “numbness” comes to seem proleptic after the devastating losses T. soon incurs. His mother attempts suicide, his girlfriend Beth dies while trying to assist his ailing mother, and then his mother develops early onset dementia, eventually forgetting her son altogether. After Beth dies, T. goes into hibernation, barely eating or stirring from bed, and even when he eventually rouses and returns to work, he considers himself “flattened” (101) by his loss though faintly appreciative of his mother’s rising to the occasion to take care of him. Resting and sleeping symbolize T.’s flatness but they also function as a melancholic identification with the dead, such that going under provides the occasion for exhuming all that has been lost, however temporarily. Scholars across many fields, including AIDS activism and postcolonial studies, have recently rescued melancholia from its clinical subordination to mourning, viewed as healthier for its rehabilitative spirit of working through, arguing that melancholia’s stubborn refusal to part with the lost object can serve as a potent protest against the ongoing oppressive conditions that produced the loss in the first place.⁴ T. can hardly be described as oppressed, but in his earlier reenactment of the coyote’s paralysis, he begins to

⁴ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, for example, argues that the practices innovated by certain queer and queer-associated folks to contest and circumvent the cultural prohibitions against grieving queer life during the AIDS era should inform the equally urgent project of mourning, without fetishizing, lost and disappearing species, habitats, ecosystems, and microbial worlds.

evinced an environmental melancholia in which the introjection, or in this case re(dis)embodiment, of the slaughtered animal marks a growing inability to set it aside. And because this reenactment happens at the edges of slumber, it draws sustenance from dreaming and from a situation of human prostration in which animals cannot be killed and the planet can enjoy, in the human form, a period of nonviolent repose. The dead, that is, dream through T.—he becomes the conduit of their ghostly reminder of a history of damage that continues unabated.

At this point of mounting losses T. visits for the first time the mitigation project required for his real estate development in the desert. True to form, so to speak, the novel gives this set-aside scheme its own narrative section—set off from prior and subsequent events—in which T. meets the biologists who hope that on a “parcel of land” (123) spared by the subdivision some critically endangered and precariously relocated kangaroo rats will build nests in the “abandoned burrows of pocket gophers” (124). T. begins to feel “receptive” and to have an “inner buoyancy” when he meets the youngest denizens of this well-intended project—“baby rats called pinkies” (though technically kangaroo rats are not rats)—but just as soon as this promise of interior development is teased, it is followed by T.’s learning of the scheme’s failure. All the pinkies perish, and although some adult individuals remain, the biologist worries that “with so few individuals in a population there would be genetic drift” and “the gene pool [would be] too small for long-term survival” (125). T. “sense of well-being flees,” and despite his best efforts to convince himself that his perturbation stems primarily from the loss of Beth, he is overcome by a “tentative” and “suspicious” sensation as if “someone had slyly robbed him and only now was he suspecting it” (125). This sensation runs deeper than Beth and manifests as a brief vision of the “momentum of empire” (recall his preoccupation with forward movement) leading to and in turn being disrupted

by the “crust of the earth...shifting and loosening, falling away and curving under itself” (125). Having learned from a biologist that “the weight of ants...was equal to fifteen percent of the weight of all land animals,” he then dreams that night of “the ants abandoning ship” and opening up “yawning sinkholes into which oceans and mountains poured” (124-125). Dreaming the Anthropocene—in sleep, that is, T. can think geologically and recognize the internal links between humans, kangaroo rats, ants, oceans, and mountains, their complex inter-imbrication and inability to be compartmentalized.

But it’s not really the case that T., with any sort of potent agency or intention—the hallmarks of sovereignty—thinks or recognizes anything. As Jean-Luc Nancy remarks, “I fall asleep, that is to say, “I” fall, “I” no longer exist, or else “I” “exist” only in that effacement of my own distinction” (7). Arguing that the “*I* that sleeps can no more say it sleeps than it could say it is dead,” Nancy concludes that “it is another who sleeps in my place” (5). This “who” risks sounding all too human; the other who sleeps, or at least rests, is everything else I am not disturbing, or only minimally disturbing, when I cease the wakeful activity of commercial capitalism and lighten the touch of my carbon footprint. Anthropocentric insight materializes, that is, not in a state of productive ambition or self-possession but rather from within an experience of profound arrest and diminution. By having T. envision the planet’s precariousness in sleep and in thought sequences described as “tentative,” the novel declines to make human genius, innovation, entrepreneurship, or lofty ambition the antidotes to environmental degradation. The problem is not simply that technocratic solutions posit human activity as the solution to harms caused by human activity, but that they also obscure less flashy, exciting, and profitable remedies contained in the idea of doing less, sleeping more, and imagining, without grandiosity, human growth as something other than acquisition and hyperactivity. Human agency

does not disappear in this alternative vision, but it contracts and recedes to take less potent and self-promoting forms. Before undergoing his many losses, T. at one point contrasts the “hard vectors of self”—the statesmen, builders, and barons with whom he identifies—with those who give themselves over to “coasting,” who “imagined and felt and enjoyed everything and ended up going nowhere because they needed nothing more than to be,” where the repetition of “and” builds to nothing and annihilates the idea that all agency must be powerful and purposive. Anne-Lise Francois calls such diminished agency “recessive action,” and Lauren Berlant writes of “lateral agency” (759) characterized less by propulsion than by drifting, coasting, and spacing out. What these thinkers have in common with *How the Dead Dream* is an interest in how the pressure to self-actualize risks complicity with capitalist systems of domination and displaces, through sheer might, more humble and hesitant modes of self-bearing that an imperiled planet just might be able to bear.

Although the set-aside proves inhospitable to the kangaroo rats, it becomes a resting place for T. Almost exactly midway through the novel, the narrative, physical, and psychological dividing line between T. and his environment finally gives way with the simple sentence, “he kept going back to the set-aside” (129). To keep going back to the set-aside is to contravene the purpose of the set-aside, be it failed or successful. T. returns because he “was permeable there, oddly inseparable from the dirt and the dry golden grass” (129). His return, now a complete reversal of the onward and upward logic that had governed his younger life, includes scaling a hill so that he cannot see the road and then imagining a world without roads, a world where people go nowhere or at least not far. From this position, he recedes into his surroundings, including “whirlpools and washes of soil and the mass of the clouds, dispersing into each other and leveling distinctions” (130). The very place he had intended to sequester in order to

distinguish himself as both a valuable developer and a conscientious conservationist becomes instead the site of his undoing and absorption into an ecology whose multiple nonhuman agencies refuse to separate or be set aside. The narrator remarks on the “danger” of this situation to human exceptionalism, commenting that “for the purposes of ambition...the rest of being...should not be allowed to penetrate and divert you from...yourself” (130). In this formulation, the self is understood to be an entity set apart from its natural environment, one whose development requires, in fact, a determination not to be penetrated by the very conditions of its existence. While the narrator’s perspective, perhaps meant to conjure T.’s earlier thinking, suggests the continued possibility of sovereign self-assertion, the image of T. prostrated on the ground visually contradicts it. He was “laid out to receive it”—where “it” renames the “rest of life” but also gathers all life into a bundle of nondistinction—“laid out by the force of gravity itself,” and as “sediment accumulated on him” and “buried him gradually...more and more he was silted in” (130). Buried alive. T. again becomes a figure of environmental melancholia, a living memorial to the many creatures killed by human encroachment, including the kangaroo rats. These miniature animals were meant to fill the abandoned gopher holes, but now it is T. who attempts to occupy the space abandoned by the kangaroo rats—a melancholic identification dependent upon the abandonment of himself to geological forces from which he can no longer set himself aside. But of course, T. is not really dead; he has instead gone under, once again a figure of sleep through which the planet dreams the possibility of its threatened continuation.

One could of course argue that there’s a kind of development of character here, or at least a change in character, but what I hope to be demonstrating is that T., becoming ever truer to his truncated appellation, does not so much gain a self as lose one through undergoing a series of losses that leave him exposed. He is “laid out” rather than built up, and while there’s a profound

sadness inherent to his bereft state, it is not narrated as a deep affective reserve through which he could be diagnosed as depressed, delusional, or distinguished in his anguish. More flattened than fulfilled, he becomes ecological not through a specific set of commitments or sentimental attachments to environmental causes but rather through the suspension of the agential mode of subjectivity that would produce such commitments and attachments in the first place. Marta Figlerowicz has recently plumbed an alternative archive of “flat realism whose aim is to reduce our expectations about how much any particular person’s self-expression interests or affects anybody else” (4). *How the Dead Dream* contributes to this literary project of “decenter[ing] our forms of self-regard,” but it uniquely ties the “necessary finitude” of character to the oneiric imagining of sustainable cohabitation (4-5).

Writing about “ecological lessness,” including an “environmentalism without environmentalists,” Sarah Ensor explores the limitations of identitarian environmental movements that demand their followers be more present, conscientious, driven, responsible, and ethically committed (156-157). These personal appeals galvanize some people, to be sure, but they also sustain the idea of the human as something sovereign, special, and set apart (not to mention upright and on red alert)—a steward capable of saving the planet through heroic action—and neglect the many ecologically sensitive practices people engage in without strong intention and ethical focus. Ensor draws on the work of Leo Bersani and Samuel Delaney to “develop a disanthropocentric ecological imagination” (158) inclusive of such practices as gay cruising, in which there is a depersonalized “ecological entanglement” (151) that is, in Bersani’s words, “less invasive” (149) than more socially approved forms of intimacy. Cruising permits and cultivates an attentiveness to one’s surroundings whose aim is not to make a lasting imprint or to leave a legacy but instead to lightly notice minor movements, gentle fluctuations, and

unexpected encounters; it is a sort of minimal self-presence and lightness of being through which ecological embeddedness can be ambiently sensed if not directly understood. Ensor's insights are trenchant and of a piece with the depersonalized intimacy explored in *How the Dead Dream*, but I am not convinced that every cruiser is as traceless and receptive as Ensor would hope. After all, cruising requires mobility and can, in certain instances, drag on and on, demanding extended periods of wakefulness and alertness; it can also involve a fixation on particular things—a glance, a crotch, a stolen moment—that impede a broader ecological view or a sense of an entangled whole. I wonder about the extent to which some cruisers struggle to sleep and find the temporality of their desires influenced by the very same 24/7 commercial economies in which workers find themselves increasingly exhausted and overburdened. If the point of a “disanthropocentric ecological imagination” is to glimpse depersonalized intimacy, then a better jumping off point (or falling off point, to invoke Nancy) might be sleep, where one loses oneself, finds common ground with others who sleep (which is most creatures), and through memory processing gives one's imagination the time and opportunity to assemble itself and perhaps, later, reassemble or disassemble the human.

In melancholic response to the kangaroo rats going extinct, T. begins visiting and, later, breaking into zoos. He is particularly drawn to zoo-bound individuals of species that are either critically endangered or extinct-in-the-wild. On his first visit to a desert museum, he “watched a bear sleep, and in the lull of the sun and the heat and the stillness felt like dozing off himself” (132), where the polysyndeton conveys T.'s new tendencies to coast and cast about, to sleep in the day as well as in the evening. Later that same night he breaks into the zoo to catch a glimpse of “its rarest animal,” a Mexican gray wolf, which had been “asleep” earlier in the day, but in doing so

he becomes “tangled” in a wire fence and lacerated by barbs, catching only a “flicker of eyes” from the elusive wolf as it scampers away (137). There is something undeniably cruisy about this scene—and “wolf” has a long history in gay lingo—but the emphasis is on T.’s failure to objectify the body of the wolf and, with those barbs, on his finding himself, not the critically endangered animal, to be embodied and vulnerable. He admits to himself, after later swallowing some aspirin for the pain, that the “joke” was on him” (137) and that the desire for “animals to turn to you in welcome” is ridiculous and anthropocentric (138). “Instead of looking at the wolf as an animal he never knew and never could,” he thinks, “he had fallen into the trap. He had wanted it to lick his hand and lope along beside him” (138). In fact, T. discovers the wolf’s “aloofness,” its desire to be left alone, and its inclination toward “self-containment” with which T. strongly identifies. While this language might suggest a return of set-aside thinking—even as it subtly criticizes the overarching containment of the zoo structure—it in fact relates T. to the wolf through a common condition of being in “possession” not of a particular personality or special purpose but rather of an “obscurity” both to themselves and to others (138). In other words, what T. comes to respect about these critically endangered animals, whose location in the zoo makes them very different from members of their species found or once found in the wild, is not just their difference from him but also their reciprocation of his own opacity to himself. To the extent that he possesses a self, he does know what it is, and this condition of nonsovereignty amplifies the humility with which he approaches other creatures.

After breaking into enclosures at other zoos, including that of a Sumatran rhinoceros whose complex “song” (remember Nancy’s lullaby) has been replaced by little more than a “sigh,” T. loses the thrill of observing rare animals and instead makes “sleep...part of the routine,” deciding to “let himself go” (166). Although he understands this urge to sleep as part of

the “boredom” he assumes caged animals must feel, sometimes excruciatingly, he also experiences it as a form of “surrender” in which “it was up to the animals what happened” (167). He always sneaks out before the feeders come in the morning—another somewhat queer and cruisy element accentuated by T.’s zeroing interest in heterosexual dating—but despite being “awkward” and “uncomfortable” (167) he finds a unique repose in sleeping in the presence of these other creatures. Sometimes they move closer to him in the night, but in most instances it is a situation of sleeping alone together that reinforces his earlier sense of an obscurity to himself and others that he shares with the zoo animals. In sleep, he is able to find refuge in, and even intensify, this profound obscurity whose partial source is an ecological entanglement that can never be fully grasped or appreciated.

His surrender to sleep in these scenes is one and the same as his surrender to the animals. If sleep is something we surrender to from the earliest age, then perhaps it is the condition of our ability to surrender to other forces and agencies as well. And if we lose the ability to sleep, or find it an unbearable scene of vulnerability that we try mightily to resist or control, then perhaps we lose the ability to act with surrendering humility toward a planet whose survival depends not least on our willingness to go under and to be obscure. Nancy asserts that “sleep itself knows only equality” and that “everyone sleeps in the equality of the same sleep—all the living—and that is why it might seem strange to assert that sleeping together is such a high-risk undertaking” (18). As Reiss documents in his history of sleep, sleeping together has not always been thought risky, and so when T. slumbers with the animals, enjoying their propinquity if not their intimacy, he resists the modern idea that each sleeper should have his own private quarters—a notion, it must be added, that has led to the construction of larger houses and the destruction and displacement of even more wildlife. In sleep, he becomes the animals’ equal, reserved for

nothing better and meant for nothing grander. He acknowledges that he cannot “pretend to the animals’ isolation,” but he does sense a connection between their aloneness and his loneliness following Beth’s death (166), where having fallen in love, and then lost it, reenacts an element of the surrendering and pleasurable fall necessitated by sleep. “Loss is common,” T. reflects, to all creatures and therefore does not distinguish him or make him uniquely receptive to the grief of others (166). But as Judith Butler remarks, loss’s commonality might be the very thing that gives it ethical ground. I do not want to dwell on this point except to note the difference between the losses of others about which Butler writes—friends, lovers, family—and the loss of the self to sleep that perhaps prepares us for these losses, permits us to process them, or at least provides a pause from their acute and abiding anguish.

T. feels a sad communion with these animals, but he also learns from them the value of the less personal and more minimal variety of intimacy with which Bersani and Ensor associate cruising. In the case of his disabled friend Casey, he learns the lesson too late. Unable to accept that her condition disinclines her to sexual intimacy, he has sex with her anyway and only later recognizes that he had “believed he was doing her a favor” and that he “was giving more to [her] by [his] association than [she was] giving to [him]” (187). Like the rhinoceroses and the elephants, Casey does not need T. to be a savior to the rescue; to the contrary, she enjoys the minimal intimacy his acquaintance initially provides, never questioning where he goes at night or why his apartment is littered with locksmith tools and news about endangered animals. Casey is content for their relationship to go only so deep, and by leaving T. after their sexual encounter she becomes yet another loss behind T.’s accumulating—no longer tender but—tenderness. Where he fails with Casey, he succeeds with his mother. He accepts her dementia for what it is, and recognizes that she can be his mother even if she can’t provide the intensity of intimacy and

support she once did. No longer even recognizing him, her eyes are as unrevealing as the eyes of the Mexican gray wolf, and yet even in their obscurity they confirm something of T. that ties him, however precariously, to his past and to a community of similarly obscure creatures (214). More fully aware of his own nonsovereignty, he thinks of his mother, “you did not have to know yourself to be fully human,” where what has changed is not just his conception of the human, no longer radically distinguishable from other creatures, but also his valuation of the full—to be fully human, given the environmental damage already done, may be far too much. Having recovered his dog after his loathsome former friend and business partner Fulton kidnapped and abused her, leading to one of her legs having to be amputated, T. goes to bed (yet another scene of sleep) “satisfied...to know that in the dark around [him] other warm bodies slept.” The emphasis here is on togetherness and mutuality, not intense intimacy or recognition, and as he drifts off he wonders if the creaturely togetherness of his house, now recomposed by the return of his dog, “could even be the whole world” (185). If this is a utopian wish, it is also, perhaps like all utopias, atopic—a vision of creatures sleeping together but also, insofar as they have collectively fallen into sleep, existing elsewhere, perhaps on a planet that can survive and sustain them.

Eventually T. gets the chance to widen his world of co-sleeping. At novel’s end, after his resort in Belize is destroyed by a hurricane, T. embarks on a boat ride into the jungle in hopes of catching a rare sight of an elusive jaguar. But after his local guide dies—native death that echoes the destruction of coastal habitat—and he succumbs to exhaustion and dehydration attempting to steer himself, unsuccessfully, back to the mainland, he winds up semi-delirious and without resources on the jungle floor. This concluding scene is certainly a nod to Joseph Conrad, but it

imagines civilization as the site of barbarism and darkness as the one reprieve we are offered from planet-eroding productivity. T. begins to wonder what might have happened, to himself but also by extension to humanity, if he had spent his life imagining “not the lights but the spaces between them” (234). As he proceeds to “forget the buildings and the monuments” and to relax into the “softness of dark,” he contemplates the “earth before and after those cities” as “the dream of a sleeping leviathan,” concluding that in those dark zones “it was god sleeping” (234). The absence of capitalization means “leviathan” and “god” name not a distinct creature but rather a collective presence or, better, a collective absence instantiated by the universal need for sleep. From within this collective abeyance the world’s future—the “after” to which this otherwise bleak scene hopefully gestures—is rendered dreamable, and it is aided by the sound of “lapping water” that constitutes a different kind of wealth, “not the kind that was superfluous but the kind that kept you alive, down through the generations” (238). This rhythmic flow of water is compared to a “lullaby,” and although it displaces T. as the narrative’s cynosure, it is also highlighted as the only possible means to T.’s survival. Less T. is the only way to get more T., where T. designates both an attenuated humanity and a revaluation of “low T.,” the testosterone shortage whose supposed prevalence, profitable for pharmaceutical companies, stands in stark contrast to the wider ubiquity of toxic masculinity.

In his intensifying stupor, T. is joined by another t, “likely a young tapir...of a kind that was soon to die off” (242). Whereas previously T. sought out individuals of threatened species, here he is sought out by one of them, as if it somehow recognizes that he has become endangered too. T. imagines that this young creature seeks his company and bodily contact because it has become separated from its mother and brother, in which fantasy T., again melancholically, becomes both the mother he has lost and the sibling he never had. Despite its “tough skin” and

“coarse hair,” T. enjoys its physical proximity and joins it in drowsily falling in and out of sleep: “In out, in out, they breathed and breathed. They both had lungs, they loved to sleep, they liked to be alongside each other in the comfort of their rhythm” (243). As the prose achieves its own rhythm through the repetition of “they,” it gives melodic form to the interspecific lullaby of respiration through which T., the tapir, and the environmental tapestry to which they belong collectively catch their imperiled breath. In one of the few academic treatments of the novel, Rachel Smith complains that this ending “recalls an older tradition of wilderness worship” by portraying “direct physical communion as the only way to engage with the alterity of the natural world” (104). But Smith fails to recognize that alterity is not the point in this poignant encounter; the emphasis lies instead on the sameness of their slumber. The tapir cozies up to T. less for “physical communion,” which by itself would suggest an almost naïve romanticism, than for the feeling of “safety” his corporeality provides—a feeling that is essential for sleep and that T. earlier feels with his dog when he is otherwise alone in his house. For the purposes of sleep and security, T. can substitute for the tapir’s mother, and the tapir can substitute for T.’s dog and for Beth—on the condition, that is, of the presence of a lullaby sung not by a human parent but by a geological agent. The water’s gentle lapping is the real lap in which T. and the tapir find repose, and by doing so they become the minimal agents of their own and its endurance.

T’s hollow pursuit of financial gain, which makes him unavailable for hero worship, has the one benefit of thinning him out and preparing him, in part through absenting him from conventional forms of reproduction, to coincide with an environment from which there is no longer any refuge because it is, if there is any hope of survival, the only remaining refuge. He is neither a round nor flat character but, instead, a flattened character whose diminution and recalibration to the rhythms of breath and water both deny human exceptionalism and devalue

the importance of the preceding events that left him ready to sense and receive them. Dozing during the day alongside a creature with whom he has no past and no means of communication, he becomes the figure of an environmental commons built not upon a shared history or project but upon a mutual need for a secure repose that, in turn, secures not a particular future but rather the very possibility of the planet's future. And with this final scene of interspecific tenderness and torpor, the novel rests.

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