

Isabel Zapata, translated from the Spanish by Robin Myers

Ode to the Minuscule

Attention is the beginning of devotion.

Mary Oliver

The damp of ferns and lichen
harbors water bears so small
that we can't see them:
transparent, eight-pawed pandas,
invertebrates so slow
they barely move around the world.

When the water runs out,
life peels away and leaves them stalled
in a state of suspended animation
that lasts until the moisture has returned.

And then they start to move again as if
they'd never stopped.

Tardigrades can survive
the vacuum of outer space, high pressure,
severe temperatures, cosmic radiation,
immersion in pure alcohol.

To combat stress, they overtake
useful genetic substances from other species:
horizontal gene transfer.

The Italian biologist Tina Franceschi
rehydrated some tardigrades she found
in a moss specimen from a museum
that had been desiccated for a hundred and twenty years.

And twelve days later, one came back to life.

Russian scientists claim to have found
living tardigrades on crafts
just back
from outer space.

The miniscule always resists.

They sound made-up, these tiny things.
But on reflection, it's not strange
that a water bear would be unbreakable.

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Tlacuatzin

The Dresden Codex shows four possums carrying the gods of corn, of rain, of death, and a jaguar on their backs.

Their brief bodies sustain the world.

Tla, fire; *cua*, chew; *tzin*, small.

Tla-cua-tzin: little fire-eater.

Bare-tailed Prometheus.

The possum takes a spark from the fire,
kindles the embers in its pouch,
and then plays dead to trick the gods.

A possum playing possum.

He mimics what he's not: a blaze in the cornfields,
an elixir to hasten childbirth, a hen-eating fox,
the ancient *zarigüeya*, an old man who likes buying junk.

He steals everything: he seizes flames with his prehensile tail.
He withstands everything: he comes back to life with a gift for us.

Isabel Zapata

Tlacuatzin

En el Códice Dresde aparecen cuatro tlacuaches cargando en sus espaldas a los dioses del maíz, de la lluvia, de la muerte y a la figura de un jaguar.

Sus cuerpos breves soportan al mundo.

Tla, fuego; *cua*, masticar; *tzin*, pequeño.

Tla-cua-tzin: pequeño comefuego,
Prometeo de cola pelona.

El tlacuache toma una chispa de la hoguera,
enciende con ella la brasa en su marsupio
y se hace el muerto para engañar a los dioses.

Tlacuache *playing possum*.

Juega a ser lo que no es: fuego entre los maizales,
brebaje para acelerar los partos, zorro comegallinas,
antigua zarigüeya, señor que compra cachivaches.

Lo roba todo: toma las llamas con su cola prensil.
Lo soporta todo: resucita para hacernos un regalo.

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Murmur

Flocks don't last in the sky.

They exist only if their backbones vanish,
their bones a question posed and answered
in the brief space their bodies fill.

They're smoke turned flesh,
a strip of curves unfolding in a murmur.

Where do they start
where do they end
why do they insist

what inner landscape are they forming

why do they insist

what orbits do they seek
who are they dancing for

what happens in the silence of the flock.

Isabel Zapata

Murmullo

Las parvadas no duran en el cielo.

Existen sólo si sus vértebras se esfuman
sus huesos son pregunta lanzada y respondida
en el breve espacio que su cuerpo ocupa.

Son humo vuelto carne
despliegue de curvas en murmullo.

Dónde empiezan
dónde acaban
por qué insisten

qué paisaje interior están formando

por qué insisten

qué orbitas persiguen
para quién bailan

qué pasa en el silencio de la parvada.

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Phantom Limb



1.

His name was Benjamin and people say he froze to death.

That he'd leap straight up like a kangaroo.

That he was a tiger striped with ash.

That he'd swipe his paw in circles like a cat.

That he was a marsupial-wolf, a zebra-wolf,

a dingo with an oversized head,

a demon, a hyena with lion claws.

The cave paintings at Kakadu National Park include the earliest representations of the thylacine: thirteen to twenty-one stripes from the torso to the base of the tail to the back haunches to the texture of the rock in the cave, fierce heads with whiskers, stiff tails reaching over the walls, rounded ears, white bellies. One of them has wings.

In 1906, the Tasmanian government paid 58 rewards for the body of a thylacine.

In 1907, 42.

In 1908, 17.

In 1909, 2.

By 1917, there were none left to hunt.

2.

Hobart Zoo, Island of Tasmania, 1921

The naturalist Henry Burrell photographed a marsupial wolf with a chicken in its mouth. He circulated it wherever he could in an effort to advertise the thylacine's reputation as a poultry-thief. Farmers never knew that the image had been cut to hide a cage or that the animal had been trained to pose for the photo. Or that Burrell had loaned the stuffed specimen to a museum and arranged it among some tree trunks.

Mawbanna, Northeastern Tasmania, 1930

The last wild marsupial wolf was glimpsed near the farmer Wilf Batty's chicken coops. The animal didn't hear the farmer parting the waist-high grass with outstretched fingers as he approached. The thylacine died hung from its hind feet.

Hobart Zoo, Island of Tasmania, 1936

Locked in his cage, the last Tasmanian tiger passes the time by imagining hypotheticals. That he hadn't been caught three years ago in the eucalyptus grove, for example. That he stretches his paws in the recess of a tree, that he slips out to hunt wombats at night. He wanders an imaginary house: to his right, his hollow tree; behind him, beyond the grove, the most succulent wombat of them all.

The last Tasmanian tiger exists for 62 seconds of black-and-white footage, with naturalist David Fleay on the other side of the camera: the tiger, head on, leaping the fence, the

back of the tiger, his broad-based tail, striped, three-quarters of a tiger, downward-facing dog, stripes at a diagonal, stripes at ground-level, stripes orbiting his own axis before he darts back into his refuge.

Hobart Zoo, Island of Tasmania, 1936

We don't have any sound recordings of the thylacine, but those who have studied this animal say that it whistled nervously (*fiu fiu fiu fiu*), then growled (*grrrr grrrr grrrrrr grrrrrrrrrr*), then ended with a threatening yawn (*yaaaaawn*). When it hunted, it would release a sound much like a cough in swift repetition (*cofcofcofcof*), to tell its pack if it had found some prey. It was also reported to have issued a long, dull sound (*wuuuuuu*), its head tilted back, to identify itself mournfully from a distance.

Who will speak to the last Tasmanian tiger?

Not to his language: to him.

Not to him: to his backbone sliced with stripes.

Not to his stripes: to the life they multiplied.

Not to his life: to the tall grass that remembers it.

Nullarbor Plain, Mundrabilla, 1966

The pit belonging to the thylacine Lazarus is 11.5 meters underground. Carbon dating tells us that the body has been there for five thousand years, but the tongue in its head is intact, its left eye whole, its stripes still visible, parallel, on the pelt of its back. People circle the cave, expecting the slab to peel away and the tiger to walk out into the light, his paws bandaged and his head enveloped in a shroud.

3.

Sightings

Andrew Orchard, farmer, 2012:

I was 18 the first time. I was hunting ducks. Since then I've seen so many that I lost count. My father also saw them. I've got proof. This print can't be from a fox because the back pad is really big and the four front ones are in a straight line.

Gina Russell, housewife, 1996:

I saw something I shouldn't have.

A murder?

No, a tiger.

Tim Kewell, carpenter, 2003:

They make a lot of noise when they run, but then suddenly you can't hear anything.

Anonymous, 1984:

I was looking for rabbits with my brother and I saw it moving in the grass. We both saw it, and it wasn't the first. It was around ten a.m. We weren't sure who to report it to.

Hans Naarding, park ranger, 1982:

I saw it so clearly that I had time to count the stripes. There were twelve.

Anonymous, 1990:

Do you want to see the photos? Look at the striped tail behind that bush.

Booth-Richardson Tiger Team, lumberjacks, 2017:

We've got three groups identified so far. They live in small families. We see about one every six months. They're very elusive, but with experience, it's easy to tell if they're close by. Especially if it's a male, because of the smell. They're shorter than ferns, so sometimes you just catch a glimpse of a floating head that disappears as soon as you see it.

4.

Woolly rhino, Nessie, dodo, Pyrenean ibex, golden toad, Madeiran large white, goblin, red-bellied gracile opossum, Caribbean monk seal, abominable snowman, pink-headed duck.

We celebrate the life that isn't there.

The shadow that moves without a body.

We search for the Tasmanian tiger, our collective syndrome, our shared phantom limb.

Isabel Zapata

Miembro Fantasma



1.

Se llamaba Ben-
cen que murió de
Que saltaba como
vertical.

Que era un tigre
ceniza.

Que movía la pata
como un gato.

Que era un lobo marsupial, un lobo cebra,
un dingo al que le queda grande la cabeza,
un demonio, una hiena con garras de león.

jamín y di-
frío.

canguro en

rayado por

en círculos

Entre las pinturas rupestres del Parque Nacional Kakadu están las primeras representaciones del tilacino: trece a veintiún rayas del torso a la base de la cola a los muslos traseros a la textura en la roca de la cueva, cabezas feroces con bigotes, colas que se extienden rígidas sobre los muros, orejas redondeadas, vientre claro. Uno de ellos tiene un par de alas.

En 1906, el gobierno de Tasmania pagó 58 recompensas por el cadáver de un tilacino.

En 1907, 42.

En 1908, 17.

En 1909, 2.

Para 1917 no había más animales vivos que cazar.

2.

Zoológico de Hobart, isla de Tasmania, 1921

El naturalista Henry Burrell le sacó una foto a un lobo marsupial con una gallina en el hocico. La dio a conocer donde pudo para crearle al tilacino una reputación como ladrón de aves de corral. Los granjeros nunca supieron que la imagen fue recortada para ocultar una jaula y que el animal estaba entrenado para posar en la foto, o que Burrell pidió prestado el ejemplar disecado a algún museo y lo acomodó con unos troncos.

Mawbanna, nordeste de Tasmania, 1930

El último lobo marsupial salvaje fue visto cerca de los gallineros del granjero Wilf Batty. El animal no lo escuchó separar con los dedos extendidos el pasto que le llegaba a la cintura. Amaneció colgado de las patas traseras.

Zoológico de Hobart, isla de Tasmania, 1936

Encerrado en su jaula, el último tigre de Tasmania mata el tiempo imaginando situaciones. Por ejemplo, que no lo capturaron hace tres años en el bosque de eucaliptos, que estira las patas en su hueco del árbol, que por la noche sale a cazar wombats. Recorre los espacios de una casa imaginaria: a la derecha su árbol hueco, detrás el wombat más sabroso, mas allá el bosque de eucalipto.

El último tigre de Tasmania dura 62 segundos de filmación en blanco y negro con el naturalista David Fleay del otro lado de la cámara: el tigre de frente, saltando sobre la reja, el reverso del tigre, su cola de base ancha, rayada, tres cuartos de tigre, perro mirando hacia abajo, las rayas en diagonal, las rayas al ras, las rayas dando vueltas sobre su propio eje antes de meterse a su covacha.

Zoológico de Hobart, isla de Tasmania, 1936

No tenemos grabaciones con sonido del tilacino, pero quienes lo han estudiado dicen que chillaba de nervios, *fiu fiu fiu fiu*, luego gruñía, *grrrr grrrr grrrrrr grrrrrrrrrr* y terminaba con un bostezo de amenaza, *yaaaaawn*. Al cazar, hacía unos sonidos parecidos a la tos en repeticiones rápidas, *cofcofcofcof*, para avisarle a la manada si encontraba alguna presa. Se reportó también un sonido largo y sordo, *wuuuuuu*, con la cabeza inclinada, para identificarse de lejos, afligido.

¿Quién hablará al último tigre de Tasmania?

No su idioma: a él.
No a él: a su espina dorsal rebanada por las rayas.
No a sus rayas: a la vida que en ellas se multiplica.
No a su vida: al pasto alto que la recuerda.

Desierto de Nullarbor, Mundrabilla, 1966

El agujero del tilacino Lázaro está a 11.5 metros bajo tierra. Las pruebas de carbón dicen que el cadáver está ahí desde hace cinco mil años, pero su cabeza tiene la lengua intacta, el ojo izquierdo fresco, las rayas aún visibles, paralelas, en la piel del lomo. Hay personas que rondan la cueva esperando ver la loza levantarse y a él salir caminando atado con vendas en las patas y la cabeza envuelta en un sudario.

3.

Avistamientos

Andrew Orchard, granjero, 2012:

La primera vez tenía 18 años, estaba cazando patos. Desde entonces he visto tantos que perdí la cuenta. Mi padre también los vio, tengo pruebas. Esta huella no puede ser de zorro porque tiene la almohadilla de atrás muy grande y las cuatro anteriores en línea recta.

Gina Russell, ama de casa, 1996:

Vi algo que no debí haber visto.

¿Viste un asesinato?

No, vi un tigre.

Tim Kewell, carpintero, 2003:

Hacen mucho ruido al correr, pero de pronto ya no se escucha nada.

Anónimo, 1984:

Estaba buscando conejos con mi hermano y lo vi moverse entre la hierba. Los dos lo vimos, y no fue el primero. Eran como las diez de la mañana. No supimos a quién reportarlo.

Hans Naarding, guarda parques, 1982:

Lo vi tan claramente que tuve tiempo de contarle las rayas. Eran doce.

Anónimo, 1990:

¿Te enseñó las fotografías? Mira la cola rayada detrás de ese arbusto.

Equipo Tigre Booth-Richardson, leñadores, 2017:

Tenemos tres grupos identificados hasta el momento, viven en pequeñas familias. Los vemos aproximadamente una vez cada seis meses. Son muy elusivos pero, con experiencia, es fácil saber si andan cerca. Sobre todo si es un macho, por el olor. Como son más bajos que los helechos, a veces sólo se asoma una cabeza flotante que desaparece en cuanto la miras.

4.

Rinoceronte lanudo, Nessie, dodo, cabra de los Pirineos, sapo dorado, gran mariposa blanca, goblin, marmosa grácil de vientre rojo, foca monje del caribe, abominable hombre de las nieves, pato de cabeza rosada.

Celebramos la vida que no existe.

La sombra que avanza sin un cuerpo.

Buscamos al tigre de Tasmania, síndrome colectivo del miembro fantasma.

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The Voices of the Whales

1. I'm interested in the language of animals.
2. Whales, especially the humpback whale and the various subspecies of blue whale, are known to make repetitive sounds with different frequencies we consider to be *songs*.
3. When we look at animals, we hope to find virtues we lack.
4. Although sexual selection is thought to be their primary purpose, whale songs remain a mystery to scientists.
5. The human body is a symphony. (Charles Ives)
6. The universe is a symphony. (John Cage)
7. Nothing suggests that whales are trying to communicate with us.
8. *The Sounds of Earth*, the record coordinated by Carl Sagan that traveled into space on *Voyagers I* and *II*, includes:

“Melancholy Blues” by Louis Armstrong
a Navajo night chant
an image of a woman eating fruit in a supermarket
an image of a string quartet
a diagram of vertebrate evolution
a selection of Senegalese percussion
a Peruvian wedding song
an image of a cooking fish
volcanoes, cricket, frog, laughter, vital signs, gentle dog, footsteps, the flight of an F-111
greetings in fifty-five human languages
greetings of humpback whales

9. What would aliens think of whales?

10. The US Navy detected whale songs in the 1960s. Ten years passed before they were divulged to the general public.

11. Nothing suggests that whales are trying to communicate with the general public.

12. The tonal frequencies of whales diminish a few fractions of a hertz every year. Are they affected by noise pollution in the water? Have changing oceanic temperatures caused this drop? If their songs are a form of cultural expression, are whales victims of capitalism?

13. There are whales in all the oceans in the world, but they spend so much time underwater that we know almost nothing about their routines.

14. We know they sing and that's enough.

15. The voices of the whales will outlive us.