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5,154 Grains

In one of her songs, Hayley heynderickx writes “I showed you a body like a cluttered garage.” Often, unexpectedly, I think about this. I wonder what fills the shelves of the clutter of her, and wonder the same about myself. What is scattered in disarray, piled precariously in boxes caked with dust and cobwebs. And what is still cared for, what has its special place in that mess. Which parts of me still evolve as time passes? Which have gone dormant? And which have gone extinct?

Life is slipping through
our fingers like sand.

Heavy like a stone, like a bad day, heavy like a body. This is what I carry, this heaviness. There is a weight to matter, to all things, to being. This is what makes living a concrete thing. So. I was told that I had a soul, a little ethereal me inside the container. What does that weigh? There is an inexplicable sadness that hangs over living like a cloud. My father has talked to me about it several times, most recently crying on Zoom when his best friend from childhood died of cancer. He said his friend was the first person he knew to put words to it. The inexplicable sadness, entwined with the inexplicable joy. The pain spirals out into the good, the good spirals out into the pain, the words spiral out from inside me to inside me. Inexplicable sadness, inexplicable joy.

We wax, we wane.

There are about 70 Amur Leopards left in the wild. The average weight of a male Amur Leopard is 70-110 lbs. The average weight of a female is 55-94 lbs. The medium of all the weight distribution, for both male and female, is 82.5 Lbs. This means that the Amur Leopard, in total population, weighs about 5775 lbs. A third of a school bus. Is that the weight of their extinction? Or is it just when the last one dies? Just 82 pounds? Is that easier to digest than more than 5 and a half thousand?

1 pound of beach sand
would fill a red plastic
bucket up to 18.10 cubic inches.

Heavy like a stone. Like when I feel afraid. I was afraid, at 6am alone on steep scree fields and glaciers that cut off abruptly to long falls. Afraid, out of water and food, sleep deprived, high and coming down, exhausted, lost. I had lost the trail, had somehow got stuck on the steep edge. I turned with my back to the cliff 30 feet below, twisted and kicked my boot as hard as I could into the snow. Edged my body out on the steep slippery mass and kicked the next foot, inching across the ice to the safety of loose rock on the other side. And across the next ridge, up to the cliff edges and I found the path. I was stumbling, I knew I should be more careful, I knew I shouldn't have left my friends, but there I was, guilty and unable to support my weight. When I found them again I collapsed, my legs spasming like they never had before. A fawn stumbling to its feet and collapsing. And I was afraid, afraid of that part of myself that rubs up against the edge through short sightedness or the need to prove my worth to myself. That part that I can only hope evolves to something better or burns out before I do.

The moment of extinction
is generally considered to be
the death of the last individual
of the species, although the
capacity to breed and recover
may have been lost before this point.

Heavy like a bad day. Like knowing and not being able to go back. There is an orchestra of voices around us, always. One by one, the instruments are going silent. My species is causing this. Life is slipping through our fingers like sand, life beyond our own. Extinction cradled in our arms.

We burn bright,
we fade away.

Heavy like a bad day. Like fear. I was afraid on the road. I watched a woman on a motorbike with no helmet slip and slide, slam into a railing and ragdoll back along the highway, leaving a dented head

and a pool of blood. There was blood coming from her ears. Quite bad. I tried to help, held her steady and cleaned the cuts and bruises. Tried to explain but I couldn't speak the language. I held her in my arms as her breath went shallow and her heart beat slower and slower. She began to die in my arms. A stranger. I felt the weight of her, the heaviness of her bones. I think that is where the soul must be kept. They threw her on the bike and drove off. There was no hospital for hours. Me and my friend rode down to the nearest town and stopped, went on the roof of the giant empty hotel and chain smoked cigarettes. A bad day. I don't know if I helped or just delayed. But I'm sure that she died and this intricate infinite complex universe just became a tiny bit less interesting. Her thread was cut, and she was extinguished. A personal extinction.

But enough of this. Enough of me. It's going nowhere. Thread cut, evolutionary failure, timeline extinct. I will place my hopes on some other thread, some other lifeline, something that still has a chance before the time runs out. Before i'm out of pages and out of words.

An average grain of sand
is about 2 millimeters and
weighs 11 milligrams.
There are 453,592 milligrams
in a pound. This means that 1
pound of sand contains 41,235
grains of sand, on average.

Heavy like a body. Like a bird, limp in the water for the last time. The Kaua'i 'ō'ō was a small black bird with yellow patches of fluff above it's legs. The bird was last seen in 1987. David Boyton, a natural historian, recorded its call that year for the last time. It was futilely tending an empty nest. The last of a species that did not know it was doomed, a remnant of history. Boyton recorded its call and watched as the bird flew off. He then played the recording back to make sure it was recorded. As the notes chirped out from his recorder, the bird came flying back, calling excitedly. This is because the bird thought that its own recorded call was another bird calling. Another one of his own species. A companion. It was the last surviving member of the Mohoidae, an avian family which had originated over 15-20 million years prior during the Miocene. This is the only extinction of a whole avian family in modern times. A single ending point, 20 million years distilled into an 8 inch bird. An extinction that might have weighed 2 ounces. At the end of that year, hurricane Iwa hit Kauai and the bird has never been seen since.

We light up,
we go out.

There is a collective old growth forest of the mind, a landscape of meaning that we are born into. People have closed themselves off and justified the logging of this place. Tall trunks that used to be languages, ways of life, species, old knowledge, have been cut down, dragged away and chopped into pieces to build something that blocks the sun out from those inside. There are species, gone forever, their memory petrified as amber inside us.

If the average Amur Leopard weighs 82.5 pounds, then the last of its species will be 1493 cubic inches of sand, 3,401,887 grains, slipping through our fingers. That is enough time to stop the slipping. We have enough time.

This comparison is not so far off. As a piece of that last leopard may one day become a grain of sand. A piece of that last Kaua'i 'ō'ō may be on the beginning of that journey already. Limestone is a sedimentary rock made almost entirely of fossils. The remains of ancient plants and animals, bones and shells turned to stone. As limestone travels down rivers and shifts with the land toward the ocean it breaks into pieces. At the end of this process, parts of it become sand. Some of the grains of sand are fossilized skeletons, fossilized remains of species now extinct. In millions of years, long after we are extinct, the sand below some foreign creatures' feet or paws or hooves may contain a piece of the last Kaua'i 'ō'ō, or the last Amur Leopard, or the last of so many other unique species that surrounds us. Us too. This matters. This matters because the earth below your feet is a mural of extinction. The sand along the beach is a mosaic of the past preserved beyond memory, in mystery. In a million years, if anything is left, we will be a part of that mural, that mosaic.

We light up,
we go out.

There is a video on Tiny Desk of a Urugain musician, Jorje Drexler, who can chirp like a bird better than anyone I've ever seen, singing a song called movimiento. Movement. At the end of the song he says "if you want something to die, keep it still." So here is extinction. It is a whole species kept still. immoblie. Forever. In a moving world.

The Kaua'i 'ō'ō weighed maybe
2 ounces. 5,154 grains of sand.
That is not so much.
I could carry that by myself.

One day, something may nest inside your skull. Flowers may grow, mice may den and raise their young there. You will give something back to the world, even if it is only your body. There will be a vitality to your death, perhaps even beyond that of your life. Your marrow will drain from your bones, 206 tiny rivers flowing into the soil. You will splinter like plaster, you will be left as soil and sand. But for now, you are a living risk that cannot be mitigated. The risk of waxing is the waning and you, like every other species, will burn bright and then fade away.

I sit at the beach, pick up sand and let it slip through my fingers. It falls, grain by grain back to where it came from. But I pick it up again and again and again. Trying to hold on.

We burn bright,
we fade away.

Maybe the weight of the soul, the heaviness of the bones is based on how much you know. Like knowing the joy makes it lighter and knowing the pain makes it heavy. And if we have been listening, for a long time now, it has been heavy. Is it heavy to know all the species that went extinct, to know your species caused that. It is heavy and we carry it in our bones. But hope can make it lighter. I hope that, when my bones splinter, and your bones splinter, and the last humans bones splinter, all the ones that burned out because of us can be released. I hope they will be free. Free to return to the world, somehow. Free to die, free to rest, free to return.

I weigh 182 pounds. That means
that I am 7,504,770 grains of sand.
But it is not unchanging.
What about as I burn?
And as I fade?

The true risk is hope. It is radical hope and it is essential. You must hope that the sand will fall upward after it leaves your fingers, that the Kaua‘i ‘ō‘ō is flourishing hidden from us, that the leopard will rebound. You must hope that all of us can carry more than we think. You must hope that we can really believe it and the weight can lessen as we do. Otherwise, this intricate infinite complex universe will burn too bright. It will be blinding. It will not fade away, it will burn out. Extinguished, before its time.

We wax, we wane.

But the real danger, the real fear, is to be snuffed. Extinguished. Can you imagine the moon splintering apart in the sky? Cracking like sheet glass in the middle of its cycle and falling away in shards? This is what happened to the Kaua‘i ‘ō‘ō, what is happening to the Amur Leopard.

Snuffed, extinguished, premature.

The risk of evolution is extinction. Threads cut, potentials lost, millions of years distilled to a few pounds, a couple ounces.

The risk of hope is disappointment.

The risk of hope, like the risk of all things, is its own extinction.

The risk of waxing is the waning,

The risk of burning is the fading