

HYMN TO LIFE

By Timothy Donnelly

There were no American lions. No pygmy mammoths left
or giant short-faced bears, which towered over ten feet high
when rearing up on their haunches. There were no stout-
legged llamas, stilt-legged llamas, no single Yukon horse. The last
5 of the teratorns, its wingspan broader than the room in
which I'm writing now, had long since landed on a tar pit's

surface and was lost. There might be other things to think of
strobing in the fume or sometimes poking through the thick of it
like the tiny golden toads once so prevalent in the cloud
10 forests north of Monteverde, only none of them were living
anywhere anymore. The last was seen on May 15, 1989, the week
Bon Jovi's "I'll Be There for You" topped Billboard's Hot 100.

Then it dropped to three. A teratorn might have fit in here
the long way come to think of it. A study claims it wasn't
15 climate change that killed the golden toad but a fungal epidemic
provoked by cyclical weather patterns. Little things like that
had a way of disappearing: thimbles, the Rocky Mountain
grasshopper, half the hearing in my patient ear. There were

no Eastern elk, no sea mink, and no heath hens, a distinct
20 subspecies of the prairie chicken. Once common to the coastal
barrens of New Hampshire down to Virginia, they're often thought
to have been eaten in favor of wild turkey at the inaugural
Thanksgiving feast. To work on my character I pretend to be
traveling Portsmouth to Arlington in modern garb at first,

25 then backwards into costumes of the past: tee shirt and shorts,
gray flannel suit, a cutaway jacket and matching breeches
tucked into boots, taupe velvet getup with ruffles and ribbons
streaming into Delaware till I'm buckled like a Puritan, musket
in hand, not half-famished, and there's plenty of heath hens
30 everywhere I look. But there were still no Carolina parakeets

and no Smith Island cottontails, a long contested subspecies
of the Eastern cottontail. These lost rabbits, somewhat shaggier
than their mainland cousins, were named for the barrier
island off the tip of Virginia's Eastern Shore, where Thomas Dale,
35 deputy governor of the Virginia Colony, set up a salt works
back in 1614, and not for the Chesapeake's other Smith Island

up in Maryland, birthplace of the Smith Island cake, that state's only official dessert — a venerable confection whose pencil-thin layers, numbering eight to twelve on average, lie divided
40 by a fudge-like frosting cooked for greater lastingness, making it suitable for local oystermen to take with them on the long autumn harvest. Smith Island in Washington offers nesting

sites for tufted puffins on its rocky cliff faces as well as rest stations for migrant sea lions. Situated in Long Island Sound,
45 Connecticut's Smith Island is among that state's famed Thimble Islands, a cluster of landmasses named for the thimbleberry, cousin to the black raspberry. During the Revolutionary War, the Thimbles were deforested to rid the sound of hiding

places for British ships. Alabama boasts no fewer than three
50 Smith Islands. Little can be said about the one in Minnesota's Voyageurs National Park. Its neighboring islands include Rabbit, Snake, Wolf, Wigwam, Sweetnose, and Twin Alligator down here on the American side, and Little Dry, Big, and Big Dry up on the Canadian. Tomorrow should be 82° and sunny

55 but it won't be. The blue pike cavorted through the waters of the Great Lakes no longer. Ditto the somber blackfin cisco. Overfishing, pollution, and the introduction of nonnative species did both fish in as early as 1960 and '70, respectively. There were no spectacled cormorants, no Goff's pocket gophers,
60 and no Ainsworth's salamanders, a species known to us only

through two specimens found on Ainsworth family property in Mississippi on June 12, 1964. That same day Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison. I remember the feeling of another kind, the way they alternately lay limp in my hands
65 then pleaded to be free. They took naps in the dampness of softened logs. There's a fine dirt, a dust I guess, that collects

under the rug I'm sitting on. I think the rough weave of it acts as rasp to our foot-bottoms then sieve to what it loosens. There were no Caribbean monk seals, eight of which no less
70 than Christopher Columbus killed for food in 1494, and therefore no Caribbean monk seal nasal mites, an objectively hideous arachnoid parasite that resided nowhere but in the respiratory

passages of the *Monachus tropicalis*. When it occurs to me I sweep it up. Back in the day they used to darken our skies
75 in flocks a mile wide and 300 miles in length, enough to feather the air from Fall River down to Philadelphia, their peak population hovering above five billion, or 40% of the total roll of birds in North America, but there were no remaining

80 passenger pigeons, the last of their red eyes having shut
 in Cincinnati on September 1, 1914. Her name was Martha.
 Martha Washington went by Patsy as a child. Her pet raccoon
 was Nosey. Cozumel Island's pygmy raccoon is actually a distinct
 species and not, like the Barbados raccoon, a subspecies
 of the common. There might be as few as 250 of the former

85 hidden in the mangroves or prowling the wetlands for ghost
 crabs and lizards, whereas the latter was last seen in '64
 when one was struck dead by a car in Bathsheba, a fishing village
 built on Barbados's eastern shore, magnet for hurricanes
 and pro surfers, its foamy white waters calling to mind
 90 the milk baths rumored to have kept Solomon's mother so

perilously beautiful. First the milk's lactic acid would have
 acted as an exfoliant, gently removing layers of the dead,
 dry skin to uncover younger, fresher skin waiting like artwork
 in Dunkirk underneath, then the milk's natural fat content
 95 would restore moisture lost to the exacting atmosphere
 of biblical Jerusalem, whose name in Hebrew, *yireh shalem*,

means "will see peace." Most versions of the story make her
 into an exhibitionist but the Midrash says Bathsheba, modest,
 was washing behind a wicker screen when Satan, seizing
 100 opportunity, appeared as a red bird to David who, cocksure
 with projectiles now, aimed the stone in his hands at the bird
 but hit the screen instead, splitting it in half and thereby

revealing our bather, the wife of Uriah the Hittite at the time
 but not for much longer. All these gains and losses, so mysterious
 105 from a distance, held together it has felt by nothing stronger
 than momentum, like a series of bicycle accidents or a pattern
 in the pomegranate, come to hint at a logic in time, but whether
 it's more fitting to say that they promise to reveal it or else

threaten to is debatable. Attempts to stem the vast mosquito
 110 population in salt marshes abutting Kennedy Space Center
 on Florida's Merritt Island, technically a peninsula but more like
 a question mark of land flopped into the Atlantic, devastated
 the dusky seaside sparrow. Its last known specimen died
 on June 17, 1987, when the ballad "Always" by Atlantic Starr

115 dominated radio. Mosquitoes would have taken to the nasty
 Olduvai water hole around which two clans of hominids battle
 at the start of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This is after
 the first monolith shows up. The film's monoliths are artifacts
 of alien origin, identical in ratio but varying in size, designed
 120 to provoke large-scale changes in human life. As when it dawns

on the wiry leader of the clan the first monolith appears to
to bludgeon the other to death with a leg bone. Later on he hurls it
into the air to celebrate his power, the image of its tumbling
weaponhood at half-speed match-cutting to that of a long
125 white nuclear satellite angled in orbit against the scintillant
anthracite of space. Pan right to the Earth, a quarter of it silvery

blue in the corner, aloofly beautiful for sure but only a pale
idea of a planet when set beside photographs taken years later
by the crew of Apollo 17 on December 7, 1972, *annus finalis*
130 for the Lake Pedder earthworm, bush wren, and possibly
the Toolache wallaby as well, long considered among kangaroos
to have been the most elegant. The sapphire blue, the ochre

of Africa, the chalk-white spirals convolving as if an ice cap's
wispy tentacles. They were killed for fur, sport, and frequently
135 with the aid of greyhounds, who hunt mostly by way of sight
as opposed to scent. Then the Earth is at the left as the satellite
approaches it almost dozily to the opening bars of Strauss's
Blue Danube, first performed on February 15, 1867, in the now

defunct Diana Ballroom. In my own Diana Ballroom, named
140 not for the Roman goddess of the hunt, the moon, and chastity
directly, but by way of the two-kilometer lunar crater christened
in her honor in 1979, declivity in whose embrace my ballroom
trembles comfortably, I boost my chi by remembering to breathe
deep, to eat oatmeal, ginger, and figs, and to commit myself

145 to a custody of wildflowers, up to and including the maroon
perfume of the chocolate cosmos, a non-self-pollinating species
whose every plant now in bloom is a clone of the selfsame
specimen uprooted from a cubic foot of Mexico back in 1902.
Likewise the last known Rocky Mountain locust ever to appear
150 appeared alone that year on a prairie up in Canada, whereas

decades before a glistening storm of them blanketed an area
vast as California, matter-of-factly devouring buckwheat, barley,
strawberries, apple trees, fence posts, and even the laundry
wildly flapping away on the line, the sound of "millions of jaws
155 biting and chewing" setting a nation's nerves on edge, or at least
Laura Ingalls Wilder's, if we're to believe her *On the Banks*

of Plum Creek, first of three books spectered by prototypical
beeotch Nellie Oleson. Cloudiness persists regarding the difference
between locust and grasshopper. Typically I keep a number
160 of soaps on hand and seem to know by instinct which of them
to reach for. In gingham and curls Nellie Oleson was played
by Alison Arnglim in the 1970s TV adaptation. The Wife of Bath

was also an Alyson. An Angrim is father to the outlaw Gorlim
in Tolkein's Middle-earth mythos. They say to run the tap
165 as hot as you can stand. Fast forward a century to April 16, 2002,
and dance anthem "Hot in Herre" by Cornell Haynes Jr., better
known to us as Nelly, reaches number one and reigns there
seven weeks. Miss Oleson, elder offspring of the local retailer,

is based on no fewer than three distinct historical persons.
170 Produced by The Neptunes, "Hot in Herre" samples Neil Young's
record "There's a World" and lifts its hook from an infinitely
more upbeat "Bustin' Loose" by Chuck Brown. Later on or earlier
in 2002, up a slope in dewy Mauna Loa, a Nelly somewhere
on the radio, the last pair of noncaptive Hawaiian crows flew

175 into the category known as "extinct in the wild." "We are leaving,
we are gone," Young sings wanly atop percussion and strings
courtesy of the London Symphony Orchestra. "Come with us
to all alone." 'Alala is the word for the Hawaiian crow in Hawaiian.
No fewer than twenty 'alala chicks were hatched last year in
180 a breeding facility at San Diego Zoo. Jack Nitzsche coproduced

and also played piano. "Bustin' loose to my love Jones," declares
the late great Brown, dead in Baltimore mid-May of that year.
"Bustin' loose to each his own." He traded cigarettes for a guitar
while serving time in Virginia's historic Lorton Reformatory.
185 An average daytime temperature of 89°. He was father to the style
of music known as go-go, so-called because the sound, Brown

was said to have said, "just goes and goes." But there were no
dire wolves, no Florida black wolves, and no Texas reds,
although the red, morphologically midway between the gray
190 and the coyote, has been bred in captivity down on South Carolina's
Bulls Island since 1987, year Tim Tebow was born and Andy
Warhol died. Likewise the year in which the films *Precious*, *Fargo*,

and *American Psycho* are set. "It can be hard to tell," the *Times*
admits of the thousands who once posed for photographs in
195 the posture known as "Tebowing," if they intended to celebrate
or to mock the quarterback for his much-publicized virtuous ways.
Nor were there any of the subspecies indigenous to Canada's
Banks Island, Earth's twenty-fourth largest island, upon which

the first confirmed wild hybrid of the polar bear and grizzly
200 was found and shot in 2006. The island also has the distinction
of its treelessness, and of being home to fleets of musk oxen.
Times I count myself among them if more comfortable in my bulk
I still can't get around the funk of us. Our ancient mouths
set to decimating herbages. In times of risk we assume the O-

205 shaped formation around our wobbly young. A sense of calm
or guiltlessness blows in. Then it's back to business with another
cup of coffee, hot beverage held to have been first drunk in
these parts in 1668, when frothy infusions of the slow-roasted bean
spiked with costly cinnamon sticks and honey grew popular
210 along New Amsterdam's foggy docks. In tide pools to the north

eelgrass limpets affixed to eelgrass blithely at the time, unaware
an insidious slime mold campaign would in centuries inflict
catastrophe on their habitat, making them the first marine
invertebrate dissolved in the historical era, the last of its kind
215 plucked while the Bank of Manhattan Trust Building whistled up
past the Woolworth like a startled monk's apocalyptic vision

of a cloud-bound train. It began in 1929. Sir Hubert Wilkins,
Arctic explorer, advocated in *The Advertiser* for submarine
technology as tomorrow's answer to the Northwest Passage's
220 pack ice question. Ice had heretofore kept a surface-travel route
troublingly out of reach, even after its putative discovery
by Sir Robert McClure, who on his eastward voyage spotted

from atop a windy Banks Island promontory the westmost
landmass mapped three decades earlier by Sir William Parry.
225 McClure later lent his name, understood to translate to "son of a
sallow lad," to a lunar crater whose diameter spans over
twelve times that of Diana, but only a quarter that of the big
kahuna Tycho, where a second monolith appears. This one emits

a painful radio signal to a third, which orbits like an onyx
230 football field around Jupiter. Rewind 150 years and McClure's
HMS Investigator, like a *Musca domestica* on a runway paved
with flypaper, has come to a full stop in the blind white grip of ice.
It felt like 1768. There were no Steller's sea cows, the tame
kelp-nibbling cousins to the manatee, albeit double their size,

235 and there were no great auks. The last known pair of them
was claimed on July 3, 1844 by poachers hired by a merchant
itching for tchotchkes to ornament an office. Three long
winters later, rescue sledges bundled McClure and crew up
and sped them back to the claps of Britain. Soon Banks Island's
240 musk ox population whittled down to nil as their flesh gave

way to the hungry Inuit who trekked up to 300 miles to strip
McClure's abandoned ship before the ice crushed her completely,
folding her metals into Mercy Bay. "I took him by the neck
and he flapped his wings," the poacher said. "He made no cry."
245 Inuit shaped *Investigator*'s copper and iron into spear- and arrow-
heads as well as knife blades, chisels, and harpoons like those

depicted in lithographs in the mitts of seal hunters patiently
 stationed at breathing holes in the ice. But there were no
 broad-leaved centaury plants, no western sassafras, and no
 250 Galapagos amaranth, cousin to the seabeach amaranth. Its tiny
 spinach-like leaves once bounced along dunes from South
 Carolina to Massachusetts till habitat loss, insensitive beach-

 grooming tactics, and recreational vehicles slashed figures
 drastically. When ice decides it must feel like being splintered
 255 from a multiplex of tightness that pains but holds together.
 Aerial shot of 1961. Year submarine thriller *K-19* and *Saving*
Mr. Banks are set in. Kennedy is president. The cloud of a hundred
 musk oxen migrating back to Banks Island rises plainly as

 narrow-leafed campion, a handful of whose seeds had slept
 260 30 millennia before being found in 2007 in a ruined system of
 ground squirrel burrows. Surveys will report up to 800
 heads in 1967 and a thousand more in 1970. All matter thunder-
 cracking belowdecks: hoof of earth into water, water over
 air, air under water and up. So that the vessel, broken, settles

 265 onto sea stars on the floor. The seeds were sown successfully
 under grow lights in Siberia, deep in whose permafrost
 international high-fiving scientists discovered a fully intact
 woolly mammoth carcass. To enlarge my sympathy I attempt
 to picture the loud tarp tents around the digging site, the lamp-
 270 lengths they putter away to, the costs. By 1994, estimates

 on the island ran as high as 84,000, over half the musk oxen
 alive at the time, but paging ahead five years we see numbers
 speedily hunted back down to 58,000, or as many pounds
 of "fine ground beef" called back by California's Central Valley
 275 Meat Company when "tiny pieces of plastic" were found
 nestling in it like the voice of Katy Perry, whose hit "Roar"

 was everywhere repeating we would hear it. "Called back,"
 says Emily Dickinson's epitaph. One scientist says to the other,
 "What's that?" The other says, "Do you feel it, Slovo? A certain
 280 category of effect. Difficult to describe and yet a certain category
 of effect is still possible. You'd think it would have wizened
 in our atmosphere by now, or withdrawn in sickness or mere

 tedium into the cold shell of itself in the manner of a what,
 yes, a gastropod, the very figure of a recluse, secular of course,
 285 anthropomorphic misnomer because its foot is not actually
 its stomach, witness the oblong rocksnail, still another thought
 extinct due to rampant habitat loss but no, not yet, Alabama
 graduate student Nathan Whelan just now located a specimen

kayaking down the Cahaba River, misplaced modifier Slovo
290 it is the student in the kayak, not the snail, *badum tish*, but
amid the mist and as if against this vanishment of dodos a certain
category persists, not unlike a last known pair of Middlemist's
Red camellia, a cultivar sent as rootstock to England from
China by John Middlemist in 1804." Note: One is in a garden

295 in New Zealand, where the laughing owl is no longer, thanks
largely to cats. Its call has been described as "a loud cry
made up of a series of dismal shrieks frequently repeated,"
"a peculiar barking noise ... just like the barking of a young dog,"
"precisely the same as two men 'cooeying' to each other
300 from a distance," and "a melancholy hooting note," to quote

The Owl Pages, sweet dream of a website whose first FAQ asks,
"I've seen an owl, can you tell me what kind it is?" The other
Middlemist's Red, long presumed barren, resides in a nursery
somewhere in Britain, and stalwart through its hardships,
305 it has begun to bloom again. The remains of the *Investigator*
found in 2010 were well preserved by the pristine cold waters

of the Canadian Arctic. And yet no one's idea of red includes
the hue of Middlemist's camellia, which is instead a true
pink, or some might even say a rose. Mallarmé would just say
310 "flower" and from oblivion there would arise musically a flower
absent from all bouquets. "Whoever reaches into a rosebush,"
Lou Andreas-Salomé supposed, "may seize a handful of flowers;

but no matter how many one holds, it's only a small portion
of the whole. Nevertheless, a handful is enough to experience
315 the nature of the flowers. Only if we refuse to reach into the bush,
because we cannot possibly seize all the flowers at once, or if
we spread out our handful of roses as if it were the whole
bush itself — only then does it bloom apart from us, unknown

to us, and we are left alone." Endangered coastal roses seek
320 some subtler way of putting it. "All the roses in the world," Rilke
gushed to Salomé — whose Galilean namesake, it's often over-
looked, didn't desire the head of John the Baptist for herself but
was told to ask for it by her mother, Herodias, whose union
with Herod Antipas, at once her uncle and her brother-in-law,

325 John declared unlawful — "bloom for you and through you."
Forget-me-nots bloom unhindered in Heidelberg, where Max Wolf
spied in 1905 a so-called "minor planet" he named 562 Salome.
That these odd bodies spatter the galaxy like pollen shaken
from a central flower, or like honeybees tumbling along with us
330 around the sun, I never knew until a visit to the Minor Planet

Center website at a turning point like April 1543. I think I saw
upwards of 3500 were spotted last month alone. "Nature is
an inexplicable problem," Emily Brontë wrote in 1842 in French
in a confection titled "The Butterfly." "It exists on a principle
335 of destruction." Lepidopterists are scouring Florida's pine forests
and gentle costal jungles on the trail of five butterfly species

feared as good as gone. They were never listed as endangered
and still aren't known to be extinct. These are their names:
Zestos skipper. Rockland Meske's skipper. Zarucco duskywing.
340 Bahamian swallowtail. Nickerbean blue. "I love you," wrote Salomé,
"with all your harms," who died in her sleep shortly after
the Gestapo destroyed her library, in her poem "Hymn to Life."

Her friend Nietzsche liked the poem so much he set it to music.
I've listened to it and can't say I like it but I'm listening to it
345 again as I try to finish. I promised Lynn I'd put the dishes away
before the babysitter arrives but it looks like I won't be a person
of my word tonight. I had meant to write about the imperial
woodpecker of Mexico. The red gazelle. I told my friend Dottie

when saddened in the predawn I have seen the people pushing
350 small mountains of soda cans in their shopping carts stop
in front of my recycling, open one bag after another of empty
metal and glass, dig through them, take what they need and shut
the bags back up with so much care it has destroyed me. I remember
bathing my daughter when she was two and how I stopped

355 short thinking if I were gone tomorrow she wouldn't even
remember. The year was 2007. Radio waves associated with
cell phones may not have been contributing to recent declines in
bee population. "And if you must destroy me," says the poem,
"I'll tear myself away from you / as I would leave a friend."
360 When there was time to put away the dishes, they were gone.