

## **On Extinction**

Chloe Aridjis

I still remember the large mirror at the entrance to the Rotterdam zoo – there past the ticket counter and the turnstile, before leaving behind the frenzied world of humans – and stepping into the kingdom of intermittently sad and awe-inspiring creatures in enclosures: a mirror. And above it, the words: Behold the most dangerous animal of all. As a child, I was never certain what that meant. Why would my own image offer a reflection of the most dangerous animal of all? Apparently, similar mirrors greeted visitors at the entrance to zoos in the Bronx and Lusaka.

By the time I reached adolescence, man's remorseless exploitation of the natural world was obvious to me and I understood what those words meant: we were, by a long way, the most destructive species on the planet. Far more threatening than any tiger, rhinoceros or crocodile. Yet despite this realisation, I never expected we'd arrive at where we are today, with over 60% of animals in the wild said to have perished due to human activity in the past fifty years. That is, in a little over the course of my lifetime. And in the first half of this century, under present conditions, over one million species face extinction. That means countless billions of individual lives. A report in the journal *Science* is one of several to warn that current extinction rates seem to be tens to thousands of times higher than they have been in the past ten million years. Before long, the only wild animals will exist in zoos, safe from rapacious developers, poachers and governments. Safe, perhaps, but condemned to a lifetime of captivity. And gradually, like the Tasmanian tiger, they will pace their lonely enclosures until the very final individual fades out of existence.

My deep love of the animal kingdom, and a mounting disquiet over the colossal battles to be fought every day, everywhere, for animal welfare, have always existed in a parallel realm to my writing life. The three novels I've written take place in cities and feature urban fauna, particularly pigeons or the stray dogs of Mexico City. Yet within every human story exists an ecosystem of other beings, implicated even when they don't make it into the narrative. In my early teens I became a vegetarian and then, a bit later in life, vegan. I've signed petitions and joined demonstrations, supported campaigns for the welfare of farm animals as for those in the wild. Yet whatever action I took felt like offsetting at best, small gestures to counter the apathy or destructive habits of others.

As a writer, I know that when something isn't working I can delete and start again. Yet in nature, erasure is permanent. There is no chance to re-write or recreate or revisit. Once a species is obliterated, it is gone forever. With 200 species going extinct every single day, from plants and insects to birds and mammals and sea creatures, how can we accept this as a fixed destiny? How can we allow it to happen?

I grew up in a home where I witnessed at first hand the power of activism, and the ways in which cultural figures could make a difference. On a heavily polluted day in March 1985 my father, Homero Aridjis, a Mexican poet and novelist, founded what would become the most influential environmental group in Mexico, the Group of 100. He called upon fellow writers and artists to sign a petition demanding that the government release air pollution figures. A declaration appeared in the newspapers, signed by 100 well-known figures including Leonora Carrington, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez and Rufino Tamayo. Bowing to pressure, the government not only released the pollution figures but eventually followed their demands to implement Hoy no circula, a programme whereby one day a week, depending on the final number on its license plate, a car

cannot be driven. It is in force to this day.

Encouraged by the results, and their voices amplified by a supportive media, the Group of 100 went on to spearhead three major campaigns, all on behalf of migratory animals. First, in 1990, they pressured the government to ban all capture and commercialization of sea turtles that swim in Mexican waters and nest on the beaches. Next, they convinced the government to establish a biosphere reserve for the monarch butterfly, which migrates from southern Canada and the northern United States to Mexico, to overwinter in the mountains of Michoacán and the state of Mexico. Despite protection, its numbers continue to plummet due to logging, pesticides and climate change, and the rivers of butterflies we saw as children have thinned to a trickle. And in 2000, after five years of campaigning, they forced the Mexican government and Mitsubishi to cancel a disastrous project to build the world's largest evaporative saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio in Baja California Sur, a pristine mating and calving ground for the gray whale. The Group expanded to include writers, artists and scientists from around the world; my mother became its international coordinator. I have memories of the telephone and fax machine constantly ringing, and of my parents rushing about the house caught up in the tension and excitement of the latest campaign. Despite those victories, the marine turtle and the monarch butterfly have now been added to the endangered species list.

My own awakening finally took place—and I say finally since I always sensed it was only a matter of time—when asked by an old friend, Roc Sandford, whether I would like to be part of a writers' group that was forming within the Extinction Rebellion movement. Like many writers, I'd never entirely embraced teamwork or public speaking. But in the face of crisis, you can't remain a prisoner of habit or temperament. Our group agreed that although not all of us addressed the climate and biodiversity emergency in our creative work, we would use whatever platform we could to speak out.

In October 2019, during one of Extinction Rebellion's uprisings, we staged a four-hour literary marathon in Trafalgar Square, and another large protest in September 2020, this time outside the offices of the sinister right-wing think tanks based at 55 and 57 Tufton Street, Westminster, drawing attention to their climate-denying agenda.

But how, I kept asking myself, could we bring into the conversation the ongoing catastrophe of biodiversity loss – a loss caused by relentless poaching, hunting, overfishing, deforestation, industrial agriculture, mining, introduction of invasive species, and the practice of certain traditional medicines? One day last autumn, at one of our weekly meetings, I proposed doing an online event with writers and wildlife activists, each person speaking about a critically endangered animal. Within hours, the planning had begun. We decided to call it 'On the Brink,' and to hold it on November 30th in order to commemorate Remembrance Day for Lost Species.

For most of us city dwellers, wild animals remain abstract and remote, no matter how much we love and admire them. During the two and a half hours of On the Brink, those of us watching online were made to feel close to each of the featured species, and to share the speaker's concern and even despair. We heard about the timid and extraordinary looking pangolin, the most trafficked animal in the world, and about Mexico's beautiful and elusive vaquita porpoise, of which only 10-12 individuals remain.

We were able to experience the reality of extinction from close up.

'I did not see you in the wild forest... I never saw you swinging through the canopy... Person of the Forest is your name, you most solitary and peaceful of the great apes,' said Lydia Millet, addressing the orangutan. 'What is a forest without its elders?' asked Sangamithra Iyer in her presentation about chimpanzees orphaned by the bush meat trade, about and

their fear and their sense of loss. Prerna Singh Bindra spoke about a conflict turned tragic between humans and elephants in India. 'In a crowded, voracious world, elephants are running out of space, they are running out of time.' *On the Brink* was about storytelling, but it was also a call to action, a rallying cry for the animals. How much further will we advance in our planet's destruction, how many more species will be wiped out, before we even attempt to pull them and ourselves back from the brink?

As early as the 1960s, the biologist and writer E.O. Wilson warned that the life or death of a species was determined by the amount of habitat available to them. More than 500,000 land species do not have enough natural habitat to ensure their long-term survival. This dismal scenario was captured in a recent story about the Loa frogs in Peru, whose habitat had been so decimated that all that remained in the end was a puddle. It may sound like a story by Jorge Luis Borges or Juan José Arreola, but it's all too emblematic – an entire stream, river, landscape, reduced to a puddle.

It's haunting and tormenting to belong to the one species responsible for this colossal devastation. It's agonising to look around and feel we are going to let it happen, that we've assumed the process is unstoppable. As a child, my favorite tale from the Bible was Noah's Ark. How magnificent, I remember thinking, that Noah with his large vessel had saved not only his own family from the Flood but also two specimens of every animal. In the face of natural catastrophe, his concern wasn't only with human survival but with that of every other species as well. Myth or reality, a story or its devastating truth, our fates remain tightly intertwined, and more so than ever in this time of the sixth mass extinction, the age of the Anthropocene.

## **Chloe Aridjis**

Chloe Aridjis is a Mexican writer based in London. She is the author of three novels: *Book of Clouds*, which won the Prix du Premier Roman Étranger in France, *Asunder*, set in London's National Gallery, and *Sea Monsters*, which was awarded the 2020 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Chloe has written for various art journals and was guest curator of the Leonora Carrington exhibition at Tate Liverpool. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2014 and the Eccles Centre & Hay Festival Writers Award for 2020. Chloe is a member of XR Writers Rebel, a group of writers who focus on addressing the climate emergency.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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