



SALVADOR DALÍ'S ILLUSTRATIONS OF ALICE'S
ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND (LEWIS CARROLL)

Two
CAROL'S GRIEF

For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun.
— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

I WASN'T SURE WHAT TO WRITE TO CAROL, but felt I should write something (email, to be precise). We had been shut in our apartments during the COVID pandemic of 2020 under a directive to “stay home.” We couldn't meet at our habitual cafe to praise the small things about our lives and wonder if there is any way, really, to understand the big things. People kept their distance, worried about “super spreaders,” and looked up what, “exponential” meant, and used phrases like “plague year” as a way of assuring themselves it was no such thing — not like the historical accounts. Meanwhile, stories of the pandemic were mutating much like the virus itself might, sometimes reversing themselves in days.

We're all in it together! had become a popular rallying cry on social media. It was meant to celebrate solidarity, and to bring relief from isolation, and from anxiety over what seemed to be more than a virus. Stories about about grief and mourning were in the news. People said we were in uncharted human territory.

So I wrote: “What is it to be *human* these days, in the collective, I mean?” This had been on my mind for some time, more so as the first weeks of pandemic led to weeks of greater pandemic and we also tried to keep our distance from a haunting awareness that we might somehow be implicated in an origin story for this.

Carol wrote back, not precisely an answer to my question: “We did it to ourselves. We came by land, sea and air, the planetary intruders. We turned harmless bats into our killers. We're locked in our rooms to think about what we've done.”

I knew she wasn't only grieving for us, she was grieving for the planet and all its disappeared and damaged. This is not uncharted territory for Carol. She *feels* ecological being, which is not the “environmentalism” of worried conservation or aesthetic appreciation. It's the ecology of an actual world where the last of an endangered species in a zoo and the daily news of a sixth mass extinction are the

same world as mass incarceration in prisons, refugee camps from war and famine, racism and poverty. They aren't placed in separate matrixes.

Carol actually loves that world, and not as an abstraction. Her heart breaks over every image of the damages we've done in a mourning that includes the loss of the more-than-human. It's like Aldo Leopold must have meant by "to live alone in a world of wounds." This was what *we're all in it together!* meant to her. She wrote: "How did we fail so badly?"

We had talked about this before our shut-in began, when we walked in our neighborhood and then to the café. Carol and I agreed that environmental crisis was not simply equated with global warming threatening an anthropogenic future. We could stop the warming in its tracks, not another fraction of a degree higher over land or sea, and it would still be a world of wounds. It's a human way of thinking a future will be fine that contains only us and those "others" we need as a practical matter to maintain ourselves. In a far distant future, the archaeologists — if there are any — might unearth billions of our domestic chicken bones and wonder if they've unearthed something instructive about the sacred and profane, and the common stories we lived by.

I wrote back: "Poor us, we never questioned the program, like some kind of ecological Willy Loman. We accepted our separate place as a species and kept doing what we thought we were supposed to do. Here we are, feeling like some tragedy has overtaken us. Maybe we've been the 'super spreaders' all along."

Carol answered, a little closer to my question: "So what the fuck? Is it only by fucking up the planet that we realize how much a part of it we are? Am I supposed to elevate that to some kind of human tragedy? Well, I don't. Even on days when I'm close to tears, I don't. Okay, maybe it's pitiable, like when my grandmother had a stroke in right side of her brain and stopped eating food from the left side of her plate. Someone had to rotate her plate so she could finish eating. Maybe we've all had a stroke."

After what I imagined were a few back spaces and deletes, maybe emojis inserted and then deleted, she settled on her final outlook: "No, it's just the pits. Part of me

wishes Covid would wipe us off the planet and let the animals have it back. Today I'm in tears again."

It's not wise to try to fine-tune grief. It's an experience that can easily outstrip the ability to think about it outside of the body. So I didn't write: "Are those good or bad tears?" Instead I wrote: "I am pissed off too."

Carol asked in her last note: "When will this be over?" I asked: "Do you mean what's left of this pandemic, or the stroke you think we've all suffered?"

She answered: "Both." I replied: "I don't have that answer. That would be like telling you a story of falling while I am falling. I mean, what happens when I land? Am I somehow transformed?"

We signed off, neither of us having found an answer except this: Carol's heartbreak is understandable.

ECOLOGICAL GRIEF IS IN THE AIR THESE DAYS. It's cumulative and ongoing, sometimes ambiguous. I hear it as a communion song of petition and sorrow. I know the words but the cantor changes: *I see heat waves. I see floods. I see droughts. How terrible this all is for us.*

Humans have always mourned. The conventions and shared language of grief helped us live better with others. There are endless things to weep for, some penetrate, others don't. Until now, we had protocols for the realm of the grievable — at least we modern ones did — that associated grief with human losses. The more-than-human were beyond a border as the unmourned, and we were careful that they didn't enter through a breach in our border. Carol has been breached. Hers is a mourning that understands absence and the spectral haunting that comes from the more-than-human losses, which is also a sense of responsibility.

How do we find our way into Carol's grief, an awareness of culpability at a global scale and the terrain of a planetary breakdown? From such a mourning there may be no return to "normal," no successful completion and then a rebound before we become stuck in melancholia. We may be left a diminishment of becoming and

possibility, a sense that what has been lost is not recoverable. We don't quite know how to make sense of this. We need instruction and direction, someone who can interpret the auguries of our everyday Anthropocene experience and read omens, not in tea leaves but in the guts of dead birds filled with our microplastics. Or maybe, like in the old stories, underworld guides for a *beyond now* that seems as if we have already made it sick.

As for our history of grief, by virtue of having a body we are vulnerable to loss. We are caught in an existence where it cannot be avoided. We spend much of our lives preparing to say goodbye at the end and be survived by children and grandchildren, as we survived parents and grandparents. Continuity is predicated on the death of others, some of whom we mourn, while others — the more-than-human — we marginalized as beyond the realm of mourning.

Go back deeper in history. Long before we became the latest living form to travel a birth canal into a world certain to bring our end our distant nonhuman ancestors were among the few lucky survivors of an asteroid that decimated the dinosaurs and most of biological life on Earth. Now coexisting with the nonhuman, which completely surrounds and penetrates us, and living in the world as “a human-human and nonhuman-human, a nonliving agency” (writes historian Dipesh Chakrabarty) is difficult and at times seems absurd.

Our Anthropocene experience also presents us with seemingly contradictory experiences of grief. Take farming for example. Should we mourn when we hear the *agrilogistics* story of literary philosopher Timothy Morton? It's a story of how we began 11,000 years ago to use agriculture to reshape a shared reality between both human and nonhuman in order to distinguish the quality of our own being as separate from ecological being. We began the process of severely curtailing the ecological to merely “the environment.” This conceptual gap gave birth to the *human* as we know it. We became “a wave that ripples out in many dimensions, in whose wake we are caught.” It set the modern terms for patriarchy, racism, speciesism, distinguishing entire classes of people, slavery and colonialism.

Or should we only mourn at the small and intimate scale of the single farmer worried about the future and the possibility of losing the family farm. “There would be a grieving process,” he might say. “It would be like a death, maybe even

sadder than that. The farm is everything.” And when rising concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere play their part in another “dust bowl” for the farmers in the American Midwest, at what scale do we grieve?

It has been easier to mourn if we anthropomorphized, more real if we understood it in the scale of the human. The act of naming the disenfranchised and marginalized of ecology in our grief is another step for us. Not such a great step for Carol.

FOR YEARS CAROL AND I HAVE WALKED TOGETHER in our city neighborhood. She seems eternally thin and fluid in her limbs. We walk past mostly Queen Anne and Bungalow/Craftsman houses with robust front gardens where dozens of species shoulder past and through each other. There is hardly a mowed grass lawn. It doesn't matter that we pass the same houses, we talk about them each time. I like wide porches with at least two chairs, which makes sense to me as a house, and front doors painted bright colors, which make sense as something to open. Carol likes big windows that let her glimpse inside. She asks me which houses I would go into and look around if the people were suddenly gone. She tells me which ones she would go into, which is most of them. She wonders what she would learn about those who used to be there. She is curious in that way.

One day, after they said we had “flattened the curve” of pandemic infections and the numbers people in hospitals and those dying, we walked the neighborhood again. Carol didn't look through the windows or notice the calico cat that always trots off a wide porch to greet us, and that she always wanted to follow back into its house once the people were gone. Her attention seemed to be somewhere else, as if she was looking at frozen raincloud.

“Maybe people just don't care. They don't stand in awe. Maybe I'm just a misfit in the world,” she said to me.

So I asked, “Do you still love the world?”

“Of course I do,” she answered. “It's never a question of falling out of love. I'm not even asking for a trial separation.”

“What about those who don’t seem to love the world?” I asked.

“You can’t persuade someone to fall in love,” she answered.

“Then maybe it’s like your grandmother’s stroke. Someone needs to turn our plate,” I said.

I thought of the year not long ago when birds fell from the sky. It started just before midnight on New Year’s Eve, in Beebe, Arkansas — 4,000 or so blackbirds fell out of the sky, dead. Then hundreds of grackles, redwing blackbirds, robins and starlings in Kentucky. A few days later, more blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, grackles and starlings on a highway in Louisiana, then dead American coots appeared on a bridge in Texas. In Sweden, jackdaws were found dead in the street and dead turtle doves rained down on a town in Italy. Later that year, in October, 6,000 dead birds washed up on the southeastern shore of Ontario’s Georgian Bay. Then, remarkably, Beebe was again showered with the bodies of blackbirds on New Year’s Eve. We asked ourselves questions about our toxicity. “If they’re the canaries, we’re all in the coalmine,” I had said to Carol.

We walked to the café. They had put a sign on every other table that read “PLEASE DO NOT USE THIS TABLE.” This was apparently based on studies of transmission and infection rates in enclosed spaces and adjusted for which way the air conditioning moved air. It was a calculation, they said, to keep everyone safe. But no one seemed to know what the future was going to be, not yet at least.

“So what’s our future?” Carol asked. I didn’t have an answer about our possible futures. We normally picture the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past. But past and future have been thrown into contradiction and confusion. We lack a confident account of ourselves in a future when one possibility is a future without us.

What if any of our possible futures depend on extending the labors of mourning well beyond the human? But such elegies are difficult and complicated. Believing in love with full knowledge, awareness and acceptance, especially at the scale of a world with billions of us, and all that is beyond us, is risky.

WHEN I WROTE THAT FIRST NOTE TO CAROL, I had been wondering what it means to live in the Anthropocene, now that a capitalist superstructure of norms and rules of conduct have fully assumed authority, and now that we humans know we're a planetary force driving global warming and ecological destruction.

In his long essays, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh tells us “my ancestors were ecological refugees long before the term was invented.” They lived along the Padma River in what is now Bangladesh. He imagines “what my forebears experienced on that day when the river rose up to claim their village: they awoke to the recognition of a presence that had molded their lives to the point where they had come to take it as much for granted as the air they had breathed ... an all-encompassing presence that may have its own purposes about which we know nothing.”

If recognition is knowledge, then Ghosh wants us to recognize that the ecological world is all there is. It's everywhere, all the time. To this day, he tells us, “When I look into my past the river seems to meet me staring back at me, as if to ask, Do you recognize me wherever you are?” Carol also wants us to recognize this.

*Then said my friend Daniel,
(brave even among lions),
“It's not the weight you carry
but how you carry it –
books, bricks, grief –
it's all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.”
So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?
— Mary Oliver, “Heavy”*