Behaving like animals by Joanna Lilley

[SLIDE – Behaving like animals title and cover of Joanna Lilley’s poetry book, Endlings]
- Hello. I’m Joanna Lilley and it’s lovely to be with you in this digital space.
- It’s an honour to be part of the EmergencE/Y conference.
- Thank you so much to all the organizers for continuing to adapt to our online world and all the environmental benefits that brings.

[SLIDE – photograph of the Yukon River]
- I live in Whitehorse, Yukon in Canada – which is up next to Alaska – and am very grateful to live and create on the Traditional Territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council.
- I’m a poet and a fiction writer and the question I’m interested in is: How can we use language to emerge from ecological and social crisis into a future in which we can bear to exist?

[SLIDE – cover of Joanna Lilley’s poetry book, Endlings, and a headshot of Joanna]
- Last year, in 2020, I published a book of poems all about extinct animals. It’s called Endlings and was published by Turnstone Press who are based in Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- I’m very grateful to them for publishing this book.
- It’s not the most uplifting of topics.
- I know it doesn’t make the happiest of experiences, reading poems about more than 60 species who are no longer on this planet.
- Especially when the published book arrived at my home in Whitehorse just two days after the Covid pandemic was declared in March 2020.
- But I wanted to write these poems. I sort of had to.
- I felt I had to try to use language to connect with lost species and find a way to co-exist, as it were, with that loss.
- I should explain the title – Endlings.
- It means the last ever individual before a species or a subspecies becomes extinct.
- It’s not in the dictionary yet. It’s probably just a matter of time.
- A friend of mine told me the word when they found out what I was writing and I was so grateful.
- Perhaps I should say that I’m not a professor or a lecturer – I’m not in the academic world.
- I’m talking to you as a writer, an author.
- Language often feels to me like the only thing I have, the only means perhaps through which I can exist through and beyond human existence and connect with our broader existence as a species on this planet.
- I find poetry in particular helps me make this connection.
- Poetry is a visual dimension too – and so when I talk about language I don’t mean just the words on the page or the words in the air.
- I like to talk about writing as word art. It feels more wholistic that way, encompassing the verbal, heard element of writing and storytelling.
- What I set out to do with these poems was find a way to connect with animals who no longer exist and somehow hear their voices and transcribe them on the page.
- It was an impossible task of course.
• Yet somehow I do feel I was able to push through what I think of as my default consciousness.
• Something did happen, some fraying, some dissolving, some magic – if I’m allowed to use that word!
• There’s a lot of magic in poetry for me. Things that happen in the process that I can’t explain – the places where poetry comes from.
• Before I read some poems I’d like to read from an essay I wrote while I was working on Endlings.
• The essay is called ‘Do we have the right to write about animals’ and was published in a book called Writing for Animals published by Ashland Creek Press in Oregon in the US.

• [SLIDE – Writing for Animals cover and questions]
• The essay is called: ‘Do we have the right to write about animals?’
• It speaks a bit to my efforts to find a way to remember we are all animals and write from that consciousness.
• Questions in the slide:
  Is an animal an “it” or a “he” or a “she” or a “they”?
  Is an animal a “that” or a “who”?
  In what circumstances could you kill an animal?
  In what circumstances could you kill a Homo sapiens?
  Do you believe humans have souls?
  Do you believe animals have souls?

• [SLIDE – Essay excerpt text]
• I’m writing here about the process of how to connect, how to loosen ourselves, how to link from our beings to our language.
• I’m going to read an excerpt from the essay.

It is exciting that our minds are at least capable of attempting to experience a consciousness other than our own. So, as animals ourselves, we are giving ourselves permission to write about other animals. Now, how do we go about knowing what those other animals are thinking or feeling? Here are some more questions for us to think about. Have you ever lowered your hands and knees to the grass on a warm day and synchronized your breathing with the dog lying beside you? Have you ever opened your mouth when no one is looking and let your tongue loll? Have you been for a walk at night and, like the dog beside you, never looked up at the stars?

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Find an animal. In your house or garden, in the park or forest, on a mountain, in a zoo or on a safari, in a book or on YouTube. Find a cat, a dog. Find a wasp, ant, beetle, robin, raven, squirrel, gazelle, beaver, badger, fox, pheasant.

Watch that animal. Untighten your face, lower your shoulders, let your arms hang, feel from the inside every part of your body and relax each one: your muscles, your heart, your liver, your spine, the soles of your feet. Loosen your molecules; let them float apart. In this state, watch an animal.
Now let the space between you soften. Let the animal’s form drift toward yours. Go closer to the other creature without physically moving. Feel as if you are merging.

Let your skin slacken and become more permeable. Dissolve the air, paper, screen between you. Become fur, chitin, bone, feather, fossil.

Pick up your pen. Touch the tips of your fingers to your keyboard. Write. Write sentences, if they happen to come, or just words. Make a row of marks and then another: your code for translating human experience.

[SLIDE – image of short-faced bear]

- And so to some poems.
- The first poem I’d like to read is from the point of view of an animal it was arguably to relate to – the short-faced bear.
- The short-faced bear lived in North America from about 1.8 million years ago until about 11,000 years ago.
- They were very fast runners, sometimes called the bulldog bear.
- Bigger than bears today – up to about six feet at the shoulder, 12 feet standing up.
- I follow a vegan diet.
- I really struggle with killing for food and dream of a vegan planet.
- I seem to think a lot about impossible things!
- I struggle with being human, an omnivorous species, and paradoxically that was my way into this poem.
- I also wanted to explore the liminal space of the overlap of the existence of the short-faced bear and homo sapiens.
- Did humans help kill off the short-faced bear as hunters came north and territories overlapped.
- The jury’s out on that one.
- To find the poem, I was trying to put myself aside and feel and intuit the short-faced bear’s own consciousness.
- I know about eating, the need to eat, the desire to eat – I and my family have a complicated history of relationships with food.
- I know about the rage I feel for humans killing off species – however inadvertently.
- I’ll read the poem now – I’m trying if I can to let the poems speak for themselves, just as perhaps a painting or a sculpture does.
- This poem is called Hunger.
- [SLIDE: text of Hunger]

I snort and suck the air for distant carcass stench to quench my craving
I run as far as sun-drop,

as far as mammoth, slick and spilled.
I mark the huddle-feast,
do not slow my persistent pace.

These stocky cats will see me, 
barge back to let me in and rip. 
Or I will swipe their bites 

across this stiff savannah. 
For I must shove my muzzle 
in corpses, crack and fissure 

stolen bones, or kill and eat 
a cub or kit a day. 
Such frequent fuelling serves me 

now I myself am prey 
and must run from as well as to. 
I have watched my kin split 

by a sharpened part of my own bones, 
my own flesh yanked 
into skinny, glabrous mouths. 

- I’d like to shift now to a species humans definitely caused to become extinct. 
- In this poem I was intrigued by how we build culture and fable around a species and how that species may perceive that treatment. 
- It’s the watcher and the watched and playing around with those roles. 
- This is perhaps anthropomorphism at its most extreme. 
- Yet we cannot know another species’ consciousness. We barely know our own. 
- Non-human animals’ perceptions of us are surely as inextricable from their own consciousness as ours are of them? 
- This poem is about the thylacine. 
- Tasmanian Tiger. 
- Lived in Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea. 
- Some people think they aren’t extinct after all. 
- There are sightings, even videos, in Australia. 
- I watched them, of course, to write this poem. 

[SLIDE: black and white photograph of a thylacine in a zoo] 
- This is a heartbreaking photograph of the thylacine taken in 1906. 
- A carnivorous marsupial. 
- Shy, nocturnal. 
- The last known live animal was captured in 1930 in Tasmania. 
- This is a photograph of the last captive thylacine, known as Benjamin, lived at Hobart Zoo.
• **[SLIDE: Text of If Rain Touched Me]**

The fence post is a broad, white blur.
Grass flickers in the foreground.
You know what you’re looking at;
you can’t stop watching.
You wish I were in focus. You’d see
for certain if I was limping.
You’re looking at my tail
and thinking I’m a fox.
I must be, because
I’ve been dead for decades.
Yet foxes don’t have a big head
like this or a long, straight tail like this.
Or stripes or a hopping gait. It’s a limp,
or else I’m more kangaroo than fox.
More kangaroo than tiger:
you’ve given me so many names.
The first of you ate me then covered
my bones with stones If rain touched me,
you believed bad weather would come.
The second of you shot me
and chopped off my head for a dollar.
You made me wolf, a scapegoat
for the sheep you killed.
Is it me in that blurry film?
Why would I come within video range?
Why did you want me dead so many times
yet now you aim your camera
to shoot me alive?

**[SLIDE: a painting of a green spotted pigeon]**

- I’m going to end with a poem inspired by the spotted green pigeon.
- There’s only one specimen of this species in the world.
- It’s in the World Museum in Liverpool.
- The spotted green pigeon has been found to be related to the dodo.
- I was intrigued by this story because of the sloppiness of the humans involved.
- They killed and took specimens.
- There doesn’t appear to be a record of where they took the birds from.
- There were mistakes made when they were prepared as specimens. My poem explores that.
- This painting even, by Joseph Smit – the pigeon didn’t have a knob on their beak.
- Reading about the spotted green pigeon feels like a metaphor for how careless humans have been with our fellow species and I started thinking, what if it was humans who were treated that way?
• What if we can tell the story another way?
• You could say this is a science fiction poem.
• And yet it doesn’t feel like it because we know how connected we are to every other species.
• The climate crisis is teaching us that.
• And now for the poem. It’s called Specimen.

[SLIDE: Text of Specimen]

There will come a time
when there are only two humans
left in the world and they will be dead.
You, perhaps, and me.
We will have been shot and carefully cleaned. We will be skinned.
All our creases and tears emptied of viscera.
Our surfaces salted, sulphured, potassium-carbonated.
We will be mounted, glassed in separate collections as far apart as London and Lincolnshire.
No one will remember to write down where we came from.
One of us will be misplaced.
There will be only one human skin left in the world and it will be yours.
Many won’t believe you are a unique species.
They will think you are a juvenile of an existing genus.
Or a deviation.
You will be taken to the World Museum in Liverpool.
You won’t have been to Liverpool before.
You will never leave.
Your legs, removed for stuffing, will be put back on the wrong way round.
Someone will paint your glass eyes red because they heard that was the colour your eyes once were.
After two hundred years there will be tests.
Three short DNA sequences on the mitochondrial 12S gene
will prove you are a distinct species, a specimen, moreover, of the legendary Homo sapiens from the Plastitronic Age, alleged architect of annihilation.

- Thank you so much for spending this time with me and exploring how we can use language to help us connect with all the other species who call this planet home.