

MARGARET NIVEN

Center, 2008

oil paint on paper mounted on panel, 42 x 42 in.



photo: r.r.jones

T.C. BOYLE

The Extinction Tales

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

He was in his early fifties, between jobs, his wife dead ten years. When he saw the position advertised in the Wellington paper it struck him as highly romantic, and he was immediately attracted to it.

LIGHTHOUSEKEEPER.

Stephen Island. References.

Inquire T.H. Penn, Maritime Authority

He took it. Sold his furniture, paid the last of the rent, filled two duffel bags with socks and sweaters and his bird-watcher's guide, and hired a cart. Just as he was leaving, a neighbor approached him with something in her arms: pointed ears, yellow eyes. Take it, she said. For Company. He slipped the kitten into the breast of his pea coat, waved, and started off down the road.

Stephen Island is an eruption of sparsely wooden rock seventeen miles northwest of Wellington. It is uninhabited. At night the constellations wheel over its quarter-mile radius like mythical beasts.

The man was to be relieved for two weeks every six months. He planted a garden read, fished, smoked by the sea. The cat grew to adolescence. One afternoon it came to him with a peculiar bird clenched in its teeth. The man took the bird away, puzzled over it, and finally sent it to the national museum at Wellington for identification. Three weeks later a reply came. He had discovered a new species: The Stephen Island wren. In the interim the cat had brought him fourteen more specimens of the odd little buff and white bird. The man never saw one of the birds alive. After a while the cat stopped bringing them.

In 1945, when the Russians liberated Auschwitz, they found 129 ovens in the crematorium. The ovens were six feet long, two feet high, one and a half feet wide.

The Union Pacific Railroad had connected New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, Ulysses S. Grant was stamping about the White House in hightop boots, Jay Gould was buying up gold and Jared Pink was opening a butcher shop in downtown Chicago.

PINK'S POULTRY, BEEF AND GAME

The town was booming. Barouches and cabriolets at every corner, men in beavers and frock coats lining the steps of the private clubs, women in bustles, bonnets, and flounces giving teas and taking boxes at the theater. Thirty-room mansions, friezes, spires, gargoyles, the opera house, the exchange, shops, saloons, tenements. In the hardpan streets men and boys trailed back from the factories, stockyards, docks, their faces mapped in sweat and soot and the blood of animals.

All of them ate meat. Pink provided it. Longhorns from Texas, buffalo from the plains, deer, turkey, pheasant and pigeon from Michigan and Illinois. They stormed his shop, the bell over the door rushing and trilling as they bought up everything he could offer them, right down to the scraps in the brine barrels. Each day he sold out his stock and in the morning found himself at the mercy of his suppliers. A pre-