

together in prayer. The rains washed over them like a succession of waterfalls. Robertson asked for a safe conduct to Flinders Island; the governor granted it.

The Tasmanians were a Stone Age society. They wore no clothes, lived in the open, foraged for food. Robertson clothed them, built huts and lean-tos, taught them to use flint, cultivate gardens, bury their excrement. He taught them to pray, and he taught them to abandon polygamy for the sacrament of marriage. They were shy, tractable people, awed and bewildered by their white redeemer, and they did their best to please him. There was one problem, however. They died like mayflies. By 1847 there were less than forty of them left. Twelve years later there were two: Trucanini, now long past menopause, and her fifth husband, William Lanne.

Robertson stuck it out, though he and Trucanini moved back into Risdon when William Lanne went off on a six-month whaling voyage. There they waited for Lanne's return, and Robertson prayed for the impossible—that Trucanini would bear a child. But then he realized that she would have to bear at least one other and then that the children would have to live in incest if the race were to survive. He no longer knew what to pray for.

When Lanne's ship dropped anchor, Robertson was waiting. He took the wizened little tattooed man by the elbow and walked him to Trucanini's hut, then waited at a discreet distance. After an hour he went home to bed. In the morning Lanne was found outside the supply store, a casket of rum and a tin cup between his legs. His head was cocked back, and his mouth, which hung open, was a cauldron of flies.

Seven years later Trucanini died in bed. And George Robertson gave up the cloth.

Concerning the higher primates: there are now on earth circa 25,000 chimpanzees, 5,000 gorillas, 3,000 orangutans, and 4,000,000,000 men.

Didus ineptus, the dodo. A flightless pigeon the size of a turkey, extinct 1648. All that remains

of it today is a foot in the British Museum, a head in Copenhagen, and a quantity of dust.

Suns fade, and planets wither. Solar systems collapse. When the sun reaches its red-giant stage in five billion years it will flare up to sear the earth, ignite it like a torch held to a scrap of newsprint, the seas evaporated, the forests turned to ash, the ragged Himalayan peaks fused and then converted to dust, cosmic dust. What's a species here, a species there? This is where extinction becomes sublime.

Listen: when my father died I did not attend the funeral. Three years later I flew in to visit with my mother. We drank vodka gimlets, and I was suddenly seized with a desire to visit my father's grave. It was 10p.m., December, snow fast to the frozen earth. I asked her which cemetery. She thought I was joking.

I drove as far as the heavy-link chain across the main gate, then stepped out of the car into a fine granular snow. My fingers slipped the switch of the flashlight through woolen gloves and I started for section 220F. The ground stretched off, leprous white, broken by the black scars of the monuments. It took nearly an hour to find, the granite markers alike as pebbles on a beach, names and dates, names and dates. I trailed down 220F, the light playing off stone and statue. Then I found it. My father's name in a spot of light. I regarded the name: a three-part name, identical to my own. The light held, snowflakes creeping through the beam like motes of dust. I extinguished the light.

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MARGARET NIVEN

Reflections on the San Lorenzo, 2010
oil paint on paper 48 x 32 in.



photo: r.r.jones