

Camille T. Dungy

A Massive Dying Off

When the fish began their dying you didn't worry.

You bought new shoes.

They looked like crocodiles:

snappy and rich,

brown as delta mud.

Even the box they shipped in was beautiful, bejeweled.

You tore through masses of swaddling paper,
these shoes!

carefully cradled

in all that cardboard by what

you now understand

must have been someone's tiny, indifferent hands.

*

The five-fingered sea stars you heard about on NPR.

You must have been driving to Costco.

It must have been before all the visitors arrived.

You needed covers, pillows, disposable containers.

At Costco, everything comes cheap.

Sea stars, jellies, anemones, all the scuttlers and hoverers

and clingers along the ocean floor. *A massive dying off, further displacing depleted oxygen,* cried the radio announcer.

You plugged in your iPod.

Enough talk. You'd found the song you had been searching for.

*

One cargo ship going out. One cargo ship coming in.

Crabs crawling up trawler lines.

Giant lobsters walking

right onto the shore.

You've been sitting in your car
watching the sunset over the Golden Gate.

NPR again.

One cargo ship going out. One cargo ship coming in.

Those who can are leaving.

The Marin Headlands crouch
toward the ocean,
fog so thick on their side of the bay
you can't tell crag from cloud from sea.

One cargo ship headed out, another coming in.

They're looking for a place

where they can breath.

You've been here less than an hour.
When the sun has finished setting
you'll go home.

*

In the dream, your father is the last refuse to wash ashore.
This wasn't what you wanted.
Any of you.
The first sign

of trouble was the bottle with the message.
That washed up years ago.
Then, so many bottles
the stenographers couldn't answer all the messages anymore.

The women of the village wept when your father died.

Then they lined up to deliver tear-stained tissue to the secretary of the interior
who translated their meaning
and had it writ out on a scroll.

These were the answers your people had been waiting for!

That papyrus wound around your father like a bandage.
The occasion announced,
you prayed proper prayers, loaded him onto an outrigger,
set him off,
but here he is again. Stinking.
Swelling.

You can't dispose of the rising dead and you're worried.
What can you do?

The Way We Carry On

There is the sky. Sshh. It might go soon
and then where will we be? Purple
and all over with blue. This temperate sky
will not comfort you some day, I think
you told me and mine, who were, as now, crouching
stands of crocuses. Too early yet! Too early for all this
springing. Am I wrong? Who would say that
to me then? Come here. Come over here
and see what the bird's nest is doing.
There are these small eggs, all of these
small eggs, none of them cracked yet,
but the big bird's away. I told you it might go.

Since Everyone Can Never Be Safe

The bitch ran in the pack
and nothing about that was remarkable
except the slick of her intestines on the ground.

But we were yakking about kids before we turned to dogs.

*They were playing, what d'you call that game?
Kids scattered in pairs across the yard, elbows linked, the lot of them,*

except the one who was it and one other one.

We worked fifty weeks a year now, adult hours.
These dinners: a decadence we could easily afford.

The loose toms and spayed pups we called our own,
even they knew there was more than enough
and no longer beat us to the bowls we filled two times each day.

If the kid who's it's too close the other kid'll grab some arm.

*Then the kid whose partner got the grab,
now he's got to be the one to run.*

My friend, she'd seen those dogs and, that night,
though I'm sure we hadn't asked her,
had to tell us about them.

*The thing that got me was these kids,
they kept screaming,*

Trevor, Trevor, Trevor,

and holding out their arms.

Then it was Maria,

Maria, Maria, when Trevor grabbed someone.

Most of us had been to the place she was talking about.

God it was hot,
one of us remembered.

Oh, and that flat bread!
We said, remember the west bank
of the river? How lazy that afternoon was.

*They'd yell, Maria, Maria,
and wave their little arms,
though any arm that got the grab, that meant some other kid had to run.*

Dinner that night, if I can recall, consisted of several courses:
Lamb shank on a bed of cracked barley, chickpeas, home-cured olives,
a chutney or two;

arugula salad with cashews and organic tomatoes;
thick-crust bread; a healthy soup;
something sweet to top it off; a plentitude of wine.

It was only the way she dragged herself along the street my friend
remembered. Like she was all together and not dripping apart.
Not dragging her own stomach down the road.

It was only the way that bitch acted.
How normal she made all of it seem.
Nothing remarkable. Those dogs. Their hunger.

I mean, what were they, really, what were they looking to do?
Even the way they consumed the bitch,
those dogs.

My friend wanted us to see how easy it seemed,
watching all of this go down. That pack was unremarkable.
She almost overlooked them, really.

The way they got behind her and on top.
That every one was eating.
Nothing could be less remarkable than that.

Camille T. Dungy is the author of *Smith Blue*, *Suck on the Marrow*, and *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*. She edited *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, and co-edited the *From the Fishhouse* poetry anthology. Her honors include an American Book Award, two Northern California Book Awards, a California Book Award silver medal, and a fellowship from the NEA. Dungy is currently a Professor in the English Department at Colorado State University. These three poems were previously published in *Smith Blue* (Southern Illinois UP, 2011).