

Environmental Silence: A Century Dedicated to the Nine Million

BY JOHN PAUL LEDERACH

1. Behind our home Blue River sings night and day.
2. She finds her source near Quandary Peak on the North Side of the Tenmile range in Colorado. Her first bubbling descends the East Side of the Continental Divide through Summit County past the town of Breckenridge before making her way into Dillon Reservoir and then down past Silverthorne where I hear her sing. For much of her 65-mile life Blue runs North, at times East, until she joins the Colorado River. In turn, the Colorado will trek almost 1500 miles South and West through another four states until her melded tributaries persist in reaching Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.
3. Rivers are like that. No matter how we seek to direct, contain, or control their flow, at one point or another, water finds ways to weave the four directions while feeding both the earth and seas.
4. My early morning walks follow the sounds of her singing as the sun catches the peaks of the Gore Range and begins to illuminate our valley.
5. It's scarce light, this life just between dark and dawn.
6. I recently discovered that presencing the in-betweenness of night and day has a verb.
7. Gloam (v): Old English, Yorkshire descent, preserved by Scottish writers; to witness the sky's capacity to glow just before dusk; less commonly, to be present with the first hint of light just before dawn.
8. Of late I cannot tell if my soul bears witness to the coming of dusk or dawn. It seems the question of our Century.
9. Both dusk and dawn live with darkness. Both feel the shift of light. Both stumble with things present but not fully seen.
10. I pondered this in-betweenness while reading about a new phenomenon in the imagination of private residence design. Massive, accumulated wealth has permitted the architecture of burrowing. The morning paper describes the trend to build 5000 square feet homes above ground that sit over top of

- 12 000 square feet of underground dwelling and recreation. The act of living opulently while descending below the surface.
11. Dwelled under. Home as burrowing. Disappeared. Out of sight, out of mind.
 12. Along the Blue, thinking of her long journey, my mind wonders about humanity's desire to burrow and proclivities to disappear things. To bestow invisibility.
 13. I have been chewing on this question: In this Century, are we gloaming from dark to dawn, or from dusk to dark? Maybe we are withering: Whither humanity? Whither our humanity? Whither bounded?
 14. The answers seem to depend on which story you see. Or which story you unsee.
 15. Pablo Neruda once wrote that two things make a story: *The net. And what falls through the net.*
 16. I suppose we see what our nets are set to catch. We rarely notice what falls through as they leave our sight. Disappeared.
 17. This century we seem to be fighting over how to unsee.
 18. Centuries before us, we used to say: *I will believe it when I see it.*
 19. Now we live a different motto: *I only see what I believe.* This might suggest *unseeing* as the act of intentionally not noticing even though something is present, even calling for attention.
 20. Maybe it's the whimsical nature of humanity to see and unsee and not be fully aware of either. Or that seeing and unseeing both have a gloaming-side, the in-betweenness of presence and dusky invisibility. But what if unseeing is not the antonym of seeing but its paradoxical completion?
 21. Unsee (v): from the Old Saxon *bihalden*, the Old Frisian *bihalda*; to behold, to keep, to protect; to attend to life beyond what first catches the eye; to slow enough to notice what lives amongst us.
 22. Some say St. Benedict had it right: The challenge of aliveness is to unsee, to listen with the ear of the heart.
 23. The antonym of unseeing seems best captured by burrowing: The escape from the very things we have bequeathed; the out-of-mind state to no longer notice what our life-breath requires of us to survive.
 24. Let me start over. I forgot to greet you. Dear Reader, I am writing you a Century.
 25. Reading, your eyes follow this odd form where my words fall on the page somewhere between poetry and prose, numbered from 1 to 100.
 26. It's the Middle-English mystics' way and the Desert Fathers and Mothers' tradition to ponder while writing.
 27. Spellcheck and editors often take issue with the falling of my words. They do not like their anarchist travels and unlikely landings.
 28. But I insist.

29. Mindfulness like water. Six directions. At once. The zen of going nowhere. And everywhere. Short lines. Few words. Blue singing on her way North, East, West, and South, into the earth, sea, and skies.
30. Authors rarely express their hidden intents. Maybe it's a burrowing thing. Maybe it's because intents are not immediately clear to the writer. Just because we say something does not suggest we know what it means. The stories we see and unsee flow like water. The listener drinks and sends the story in new directions.
31. Here's one taste this Century may offer: I should wish that you, the reader, stop. In fact, I wish the whole of humanity would stop, for one deep sip of withering.
32. Slow the eyes enough to hear. Slow the tongue enough to savor. Slow the heart enough to see. Slow the soul enough to behold.
33. How else to understand this gloaming Century we inhabit? How else to sense, not just where we are bound but where we are bound together? How else, but to slow enough to practice the craft of beholding? How else to take note that in our rushing we invisibilize the legacy of our collective impact on our very survival?
34. Behold (v): To gather the senses such that the sound of light as it illuminates what has been present but invisibilized penetrates the soul; to be unblinded; to unsee.
35. I first learned about unseeing and beholding from a friend in Sudan. It was the 1980s. We were living in a house of strangers in Belgium. Stranger is what the French language calls a foreigner. We were both strangers of the same age. We came from very different places. Strange friends always teach you the most about yourself. If you can learn to unsee.
36. When he traversed from child to manhood, his elders marked his forehead and cheeks. Identity for life. Belonging and separation placed at face value.
37. I once asked him about the scars. It was hard for my eyes not to notice. *When you first see me, you see the marks on my face. They speak to what home I came from. They say where I belong. But if you want to really see me, you have to unsee me. You must feel for what is here but not fully visible behind the noise of what first appears in your eyes.*
38. The noise of our markers invisibilizes what sits in plain sight and silences the source's cry. Here we find the difference between disappearing something and unseeing something.
39. Disappear (v): To render what is present invisible; to take life.
40. Unsee (v): To notice what has been disappeared but truly matters; to bring alive.
41. More than we know, we move through life with blinders and blinkers, these small curtains that rise round the edge of work horses that keep them only seeing what they are drawn to see and not notice those things that may be present but cut from view.

42. I confess: I have for too long proffered in professional blinkers. Some call them winkers.
43. I may not be alone. It seems a relevant confession for burrowers, borrowers, and benders of tunnels in this Century.
44. Noticing our winkers sits at the heart of my imploring for the reading of this Century. Not the one I am writing. The one we are living.
45. As I am writing in confessional mode, let me tell the story of how I learned to behold my professional winkers and my wandering ponder to unsee.
46. Very unexpectedly, my revelations arrived in the guise of numbers.
47. Scientists like numbers.
48. I never much went the route of counting as the best way to assess what counts.
49. I preferred the songs of rivers or the sounds of a wheat field holding a Kansas wind.
50. I soon found that these songs and sounds did not appear on my Graduate School entry exam. And they did not bode well for the first semester pursuing the Doctoring of Philosophy, this unfolding path of seeking how and what to know, or at least to receive the blessings of the knowledge-carriers that my path was correctly unfolding.
51. Between me and my desire to become a Doctor in the noble pursuit of understanding human conflict and how we forge peace sat the required courses of *Statistics 101 and 102*.
52. Looking back, I think the only way I survived the long journey of sociology's covetousness of the mathematician's muse was Dr. Ray Cuzzort. In his last years of teaching, he had made it his challenge to help even poets behold the ubiquitous and wondrous nature of singing rivers all around us, even if they presented as numbers.
53. He once took me to the stairwell of Old Ketchum Hall on the campus of the University of Colorado where decades of traveling feet had shaped the steps and handrails. *If you listen close enough, you can hear the Bell Curve*, he laughed. Or the time we sat under a tree, and he asked me to watch the play of shadow and light on the ground. *Without looking up*, he'd say, *imagine the contours of the relationships between the tree's leaves, the wind, and the sun. Now, try telling a story about what you imagine.*
54. *Statistics 101: A guidebook for unseeing.*
55. We have been counting away for decades in the study of war and peace. It may seem odd that a significant part of my peace studies field spends inordinate time counting and separating deaths.
56. Sorting. We sort a lot. We examine categories in which to place the deaths of our fellow humans to create reliable comparisons.

57. We need to know the difference between the square hole of war, the triangular hole of armed conflict, or say just the random and rather large circular hole that gathers homicides or suicides.
58. Categories try to make order of the messiness around us. I suppose it is the very nature of science to argue about place and fit. We would not want a triangular death to fall through a square hole.
59. In the pursuit of comparisons and counting, at some point we opted for 25. Twenty-five deaths attributed to organized violence between a government and say an insurgency, we can put this *thing-we-count* in the square hole of dyadic conflict called war.
60. Numbers matter. Number matters.
61. But sometimes numbers numb you to death. It's a very noisy world out there.
62. I speculate this may be why we need to unsee. We have so much noise we can no longer notice. We cannot hear the rivers flow or winds catch the wheat, or *the life* in the death of it all.
63. And sometimes numbers startle you awake.
64. Just recently I got startled. Awake! Awake enough to notice my need to unsee.
65. It started with these crazy numbers: 90 000, 460 000, and 9 000 000. Then came 960, 30, and 1. All compiled by 2022. Let me tell you a short story from the dance of their light and shadows, of what fell through the net and what the net caught.
66. In 2020 across our globe 460 000 people died in homicides.
67. Between 2000 and 2020, on average 90 000 people died per year due to war. The figure for organized violence in the year 2021 rose to 119 000.
68. In 2020, 9 000 000 people died due to human produced toxic pollutants released in the air, water, and ground. And that does not include nano-plastics that now flow in our veins.
69. Reviewing 960 articles from 2000–2022, in one of the most prestigious peer-reviewed peace studies journals, only 30 of those articles discussed climate change. One article mentioned the link of peace and pollution. 1. The mention was found in the annexed footnotes. The largest number of articles referred to some aspect of understanding the 90 000 average deaths per year due to organized violence where we count the cases starting with 25 deaths. Something seems askew. Nobody noticed the 9 000 000. Disappeared. Invisibilized. Present but unnoticed.
70. I insist on single lines.
71. To stop your reading enough to behold.
72. In the first 20 years of this Century, violent deaths from wars averaged less than 100 000 per year.
73. Violence from human-produced toxins took 9 000 000 lives in 2020.

74. My cherished peace and conflict studies also appear to dwell in a Century of burrowing and borrowing. I am hardly exempt. We counted wars. We needed a dozen deaths to find the square hole. We wrote books and volumes of articles about what we counted, how to prevent war and how to end it. We did not write about the nine million. Their rounded lives did not fit our square hole. If they had all died in one location, if they were of one religion, one language, or one ethnicity, if it was considered organized visible violence we would call this a genocide. But we are not sure what shape these 9 million might be. That's the thing with numbness. If we can't feel it, we can't count it. And then the *It* falls through the net. Silently.
75. Our humanity fell through the net. Storyless.
76. Environmental silence (n); the midwife of environmental violence.
77. How do we unsee environmental violence?
78. I suppose this Century I am writing you wanders round the story of how I came to see my winkers and my long wandering ponder about the challenges of unseeing the 9 million. Why not poems about their lives? Why not articles, chapters, and books about their legacy? Why not syllabi and degree programs on how to prevent and end the loss? Why do their numbers not matter? Why do they fall through the net silent and invisible?
79. On my walks these days, Blue River seems to be singing her own numbers.
80. She's a small river by most any comparison. But she helps feed two large reservoirs in Colorado that in turn feed our cities, not to mention the thirst-bound geographies across the Southwest.
81. In 2022, the Summit County Water Commissioner and Public Relations Office wrote that Blue's annual flow had reduced what she shares with various reservoirs, the ones that now sit at 24% capacity.
82. Their discussion also noted that for every 1° of Fahrenheit rise in average global temperature, stream flows like Blue's reduce 3%. More numbers.
83. Scientists like to imagine that numbers are objectively neutral as if they enter our lives without feel, taste, or smell.
84. But some numbers are just salty even when they flow in sweet water.
85. Nature, after all, has a whimsical love of paradox and parody. Take 1° and 3% as poetry.
- 86.

While Blue River Dries the Seas Slowly Rise

*Amidst her singing
Blue River gulps for air
I know it's a loose boulder
somewhere midstream,
wavering at the edge
of a slow swirling eddy*

*she's running low these days
her gasping at eddy's edge
seems a lament for lost snows*

I wonder if rivers cry?

87. I can hear the 1° drop. I suppose it's like listening for the Bell Curve on worn university steps.
88. Singing brooks were always a metaphor of joy. Now the lament appears as a dark ring on the rock-bed shores; our willow and cottonwood roots exposed.
89. Some mornings I wonder what life would be if Blue was disappeared.
90. I imagine we'd have a crisis. We humans are calamity penchant.
91. I have noticed that river crisis reporting has been making the six o'clock news. Climate Strange does that.
92. We always find the path to crisis our way through the Centuries.
93. Crisis (v): from the Middle English; the inflection point of a disease; from seafarers; to helm a ship from its wake.
94. Listening to Blue sing, I have been wondering. Of centuries and crises. Of joys and laments. Of words and silence.
95. I gloam in questions, lost for words for how to crisis our way in this dusk and dawn.
- 96.

A Century of Questions

Afterwards

I wonder where
the words will go?

After the seas
have swallowed
the islands
and the fires lay
smoldering drunk
I wonder where
the words will go?

After the forests
sink from embers
into smoky bogs
and prepare for
their long soak
into muddy
millennial crude

I wonder where
the words will go?

Will iridescent
Red Throated Rufous
still follow the
irresistible pull
of North and South
and travel four thousand
miles back and forth
each year?

Will Vermillion Flycatcher
change her name?

For what will
Western Osprey cry
in early dawn when
the Rocky Mountain
lakes run dry?

Afterwards
will Indian Paintbrush
and thorny Ocotillo
and Mexican Firestick
send their flames skyward?

Or will they just blend in?

And where will Columbine
and Lilly of the Valley
heaven?

After the winds
exhaust their fury
and Laughing Gulls
no longer gather
along Atlantic shores
and the Sahel has sand
duned the Niger River
I wonder where
the words will go?

Will Robin's
eggs still carry

enough biliverdin
to keep them blue?

Will stately Sahuaro
still trumpet white?

Will Redhead Earthworm
come up for air?

Will Cirrus and Lenticular
and Cumulonimbus still float
the skies even if no children
flatten face-up in fields to
watch them pass?

Will Thunder rage
if nobody listens?

Who will the devoted rippling
waves of Lake Constance
put to sleep?

And where will
Manta Ray dine
when the plankton
have all dried and gone?

Will the Southern Fire Ants
still push up grains of sand
when the earth itself
takes on their name?

Where in this wondrous world
will all the words go?

After: All?

97. If we are to find the dawn, we will need to unsee beyond the noise and turn the ear of our hearts to gather the faces of the nine million. They are us. Burrowing is not an option.
98. The numbing numbered fact is this: Climate Change may slowly be arriving. Climate Strange arrived long ago. This mix of global warming and humanly produced toxic pollution is not on the horizon. It's our invisible presence, the loss of life we have been gloaming in for years.
99. We cannot disappear this crisis. We are surrounded by it.
100. Nine million people falling through the net are too loud to be numbed.