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Part Two: In the house of life

The philosopher Lev Shestov made the point that it takes a certain kind of craziness to love all that is doomed to perish. His context was a rave against 'reason', by which he meant scientific positivism, certain forms of rationality, and other aspects of modernity. He equated modernity's philosophical reason with a majestic and dispassionate unity that universalised truth and morality by suppressing the particular, the contingent and the ephemeral, including most especially the life that ends in death. He asserted that if we were to reject this universalising erasure of the particular, then 'will break forth innumerable selfhoods that philosophy has kept in fetters during the course of thousands of years with their unsatisfied desires, with their inconsolable sorrows...' (Shestov 1982, 85).

In the face of these calls of desire and grief, Shestov urges us 'to learn anew to be horrified, to weep, to curse, to lose and find again the last hope'. That hope, for Shestov, is an 'enigmatic craziness' that he finds in relation to God (87). In following his logic, I argue for a kind of crazy love that is directed toward earth life (Rose 2011b, 108-111). This is exactly what is called for in the deathzone, but not only there, and not only amongst humans. Throughout the whole of the house of life, crazy love springs forth in the face of death.

I will explore the practice of crazy love through a story of an albatross couple and their chick. The small part of the story I share here is the tip of a beautiful iceberg. It concerns Laysan Albatross on the Hawaiian island of Kaua'i. These fantastic birds fly eighty thousand or

more kilometres annually to gather food from the North Pacific and raise their chicks on islands in the temperate waters around Hawaii. It is possible to walk amongst them, even when they are nesting. This in itself is a very odd experience for a human, accustomed as we are to the fact that so many other animals fear us and seek to get away from us.¹

They mate for life, and show significant site fidelity as well, often returning to make nests where they were hatched. One couple raises one chick per year; they take it in turns to sit on the egg, each one going out to feed for several weeks while the other one takes their turn on the nest. The parent on the nest neither eats nor drinks while they wait for their mate to return – sometimes, as in this story, one parent may wait more than five weeks for his mate to relieve him (Safina 2002, 4-6).

Albatross go through an adolescence that lasts several years, and during this time one of their great activities is dance. They are courting, in ethological terminology, working out who they will partner with, but, as we will see, dance is communicative in contexts other than courting, and along with dance there is also a lot of vocalisation and grooming. The story of the particular couple I relate here is connected to the story of a human couple named Louise and Rick. Their home is situated on a bluff overlooking the ocean on the small island of Kaua'i north-west of Oahu. Here the albatross couple courted and danced, and last year they built a nest and had their first egg together.² This is a new nesting location for albatross – there is no record of any albatross nesting here before. Louise and Rick said that they felt deeply honoured to have the birds select their yard for their nest. The nest was just inches from the house, and Louise and Rick observed the birds, the nest, and the egg over the

¹ The albatross' lack of fear has contributed to their vulnerability to rapacious human desires for consumption – a desire for feathers for women's hats, for example, that drove one albatross species to the absolute edge of extinction, and a desire for albumen – used in photography – that fuelled an egg poaching industry on Midway Island that also had devastating effects on the north Pacific albatross. The population probably dropped from about 10 million to about one million birds (Safina 2002, 80-81, 183-4; Ruttie n.d.).

² Rick, Louise and Hob deduce that this was the first egg the couple had.

next eight weeks. They cherished the fact that they were living so close to the albatross, and they asked some native Hawaiian friends to help name the birds. Accordingly, the female was named Makana meaning "the freely given gift", and the male became Kūpa'a meaning "steadfast, loyal, protector, good provider".

Louise took notes on everything. She saw the egg being laid, she knew when the dad returned to give the mom a break. She knew when the dad started getting so weak, after five weeks of patient brooding, that he actually had to leave the egg. And she and Rick knew from albatross biologists that there was a grace period of about four days during which the chick would survive unattended, if a parent returned to continue incubating it. They waited tensely to see what would happen, and they were incredibly relieved when the mother returned after three days.

Not long after the mother returned, the father also came in. And by now it was clear to all that something was wrong with the egg. Here I take up the story in Louise's and Rick's own words.

Louise: When we came back to our house on the afternoon of the third day, we saw she was there, and then he came back on the 31st, twelve days later, and that's when the egg was broken. We think it had broken that morning, because I'd been watching it and it seemed okay.

That was when it was really sad. We did nothing but cry that whole day, pretty much. Because they, Makana and Kūpa'a, were out there mourning and crying. They were crying this most mournful ...

Rick: *They* were crying!

Louise: We were *all* crying. You could tell it was a different sound. They were doing the 'sky moo', but instead of their oooh, oooh, it was aah, aah [wailing]. It was sad. Awful. Just awful.

Rick: But she did sit on it for those twelve days, and she was talking to it and moving it, and then on the morning that he came back again, she got off the nest and the egg was flat.

Louise: The egg had been getting darker, too. The colour of it had changed. There was a chick inside, but it was dead. It was already kind of crushed a little, and mixed in with the dirt. You could see feathers, down.

Rick: So Kūpa'a came up, and Makana stood up to greet him, and it appeared that he understood what the situation was sooner than she did. Or, that he was able to accept it.

Louise: I don't think she knew before that, that the egg was broken.

Rick: She may have been in that trance state. So, she kept on trying to sit on it, and he would talk to her. He was starting to groom her. And she started to appear to realise that there was a problem with the egg, and they started to grieve. She really struggled to accept it – the loss of their chick. We can't do anything but anthropomorphise, because from their behaviour it appeared that she didn't want to accept that the egg was gone. And so she'd try to rearrange it in the nest, and she'd talk to it, and he would talk to it and then he would try to comfort her. Aah, it was difficult. And it was difficult for them. You could tell that they really struggled with their emotions.

Louise: It was just like he was saying, 'this is what's happened and you've got to accept it'. He would nuzzle her, and talk to her, and a couple of times she almost appeared to be saying 'leave me alone' to him. She almost was just drawing back from his grooming, and you could just see that he was trying to get her to understand, and she knew but she didn't want to accept it. It really seemed very clear.

Rick: He wasn't making any effort to get her off so he could sit on the egg. So he really knew there was no reason to continue sitting on the nest. But he stayed with her for a good three, four hours.

Louise: He'd walk away a few times, and then he'd come back and try to comfort her. But it was a long time.

Then about 12:30, she went out and walked over there, waited for the wind, took off, and then changed her mind. She just totally changed her mind, like saying 'I'm not going'. She crash landed and she ran back over

here. She just couldn't leave...couldn't leave. And she sat on the nest. She sat on the nest a lot. And he kept trying to groom her and trying to get her to accept it, and it's like she knew it, but it was like she said 'I don't care'.

He finally left at 1:10. She tried to leave three other times, and went back to the nest, and finally she left at 4:30. She'd get up, she'd walk out there, she'd look around. I couldn't tell if she was waiting for the wind to be right and she was ready, or if she was trying to decide if she should go yet. So she finally left about 4:30 in the afternoon.

Rick: They had left separately. Which makes the next part even more remarkable.

Louise: On February 9, that's about the time the egg would have hatched if it had lived, they came back.

Rick: Together.

Louise: Together. Yes. So how can you not think, I mean, it's just impossible not to think that they knew that that was the time it would have hatched. It's just too coincidental.

Rick: So they came back to the nest, they talked to the egg remains, and they grieved. They comforted each other.

Louise: Yes, they both went right over to the nest and started doing the same things they were doing when they realised that the egg was not going to hatch.

Rick: But they didn't try to sit on it. They talked to it.

Louise: Right, they talked to it.

Rick: And they grieved and they sat near the nest but they didn't sit on the nest.

Louise: Yes, they sat near it, around it. They'd get up and walk around, and then come back and sit near the nest. Talk some more. And that was really sad, too.

They were there a few hours if I remember right. Rick: There's no doubt they knew exactly what had been their egg. They weren't picking up a stone or talking to a stone, they were talking to the egg remains.

But the story doesn't end... because they came back.

They came back a week later, together. They went to the nest, they grieved for a while. And then they ~

~ they went out in the yard and they danced.

Louise: We've read, or someone's told us, that Laysan albatross only dance until they commit, until they decide that they are each other's mate. But they were dancing, and they clearly had decided before this that they were each other's mate. They were dancing just like teenagers, like young courting albatrosses do.

And then they were around for probably another month.

Rick: They came back almost daily, and the appearance was that they were deciding where their nest was going to be next year. They walked all along the driveway here, and they'd pick a spot and they'd settle down, spend a couple of days there, and then try another spot.

The albatross left for the months they spend in the air, and as of the time of writing, Louise and Rick are waiting for their return. In reflecting on these events, Louise again pointed to the difficulty and necessity of telling stories like this:

And even if our interpretation of it is wrong, it is clear that they were experiencing something, their behaviour was different, they have a relationship, there was clearly a process going on, even if it is not exactly as we interpret it, there was a process they were going through to relate what had happened, and get through what had happened

The story of how Louise and Rick came to have these albatross dancing, mating and nesting in their yard is part of a wider story of

multispecies conviviality. It is driven in part by a remarkable woman named Hob Osterlund who has organised the Kaua'i Albatross Network and who is indefatigable in her love and advocacy of albatross. The story is too long to tell fully here, but the main point is that many people in this area have so loved sharing their lives and properties with albatross that they are now involved in programmes to assist the birds to relocate from places of potential harm to these places of relative safety. The most massive potential harm, of course, is sea level rise. Ninety percent of the Laysan Albatross nest on Midway Island. If sea levels rise as anticipated due to anthropogenic climate change, their nesting ground will no longer exist (Safina 2002, 166-167).

People in Kaua'i and other islands are developing transitional ecologies that will help albatross form new fidelities to places where they will continue to be safe even in the event of sea level rise. They are enticed by decoys that give the impression of dancing albatross, and the decoys are accompanied by solar-panelled speakers, disguised as stones, that broadcast albatross sounds of happy dancers.

The crazy love that albatross demonstrate for their mate and chick encounters the crazy love of people who are doing all they can to help them thrive. Exactly here, within the shadow of the Anthropocene, exactly here we encounter the crazy love that keeps calling others back from the edge of disaster, and staying with those who grieve in the wake of death.