

New Nonfiction from Ulf Pike: “Tone Deaf”

With a slightly youthful blurring of reality, sandhill cranes resemble pterodactyls in flight. Each year when they return to the valleys and high plains of southern Montana, their warm bugles trill two miles in advance of their prehistoric forms, sounding the merciful turning of the season.



Fuzzy aspen catkins map sporadic, swirling gusts while the thawing ground gives underfoot. Surrounding peaks loosen their hold on treasuries of snow, reluctant at first and then with the ecstatic flourish of a gambler intent on losing it all—as one must be, in the end, to live free and die well.

Drainages thrum with frigid, crystal surges, pulling down silver snags and churning up boulders. A great tumbler, the mountain unlocks, releasing winter to the rivers and creeks in muddied volumes. Sagebrush slopes and grassy pastures blush green where fawns wobble on new legs after their mothers and drop like speckled stones at the faintest threat. Smoke rises in thin columns from slash piles and wafts throughout the valley, drawing on long memories of starry skies, the sharing

of food and mingled voices around an evening fire. Days open and close in slow beauty along the arc of the sun, in the ungovernable balance of the planet, in the violent, wordless, infallible perfection of natural phenomena sustaining us. Atmospheric pressures constrict into fists and then fall sharply. Cumulus clouds gather and darken into an anvil where the season's first low peal of thunder is hammered out like a skeleton key to the warm womb of the universe.

In the beginning was the tone: that matter-manipulation wrought between the amplitude of some original cosmic drop. The vibratory paradox of which resonates in perpetuity, pleading with us like a mother to please, for heaven's sake, turn off that noise and go outside. Deep down she feels an impossible urgency to protect her babies from her own need to protect them. She is plagued by her duty and meditates on one true miracle: In the beginning, she knows, either something came from nothing or everything is infinite. She peers into the pit of strip mine, down through geologic eras and finds herself traversing veins of minerals through time. She feels the sublime adrenaline of a shrew falling under the shadow of an archaeopteryx, everything vibrating at harmonic frequencies with the unequivocal imperative of that original-bird. Both lived in

vibrant, kinetic, absolute necessity. The shadow of death is what kept them both alive. That was the tone. For millions and millions of years. Anthropologists surmise that during an era in emergent hominoid history the tone forever changed when consciousness was identified.

What is perhaps most unique about being human, as far as we know, is that we know. We know we are here. There is a thing that it is like to be human and we know of this thing as an abstraction from our corporeal, moment-to-moment presence. And what purpose does this knowledge serve? To know we are here means we also know that at some point we will cease to be? This ancient epiphany was the foundation of the first

timeline, the first mystery of existence.

Life was suddenly charged with new impulses for projections and provisions. Planning on death redefined human instinct to produce surplus, more resources than were required to satiate immediate hunger. By fortune of birth or early migration, populations in resource-rich environments were able to procure exceptional stores of wealth allowing their numbers to grow exponentially. In their numbers was previously unknown strength. The protection of such wealth spawned the crude hierarchy of class and government, the legacy of organized warfare and systemic dependence under which our race of knowers still generally functions today. Though “functions” is a relative term. A heart, after all, can function just as flawlessly as a guillotine.

On the flip side of the surplus coin was the novelty of free-time, at least for those of some status. The cultivation of self-consciousness, almost by necessity, amplified the otherness of everything outside the experiencer’s internal landscape. Just as projections of an abstract physical future produced surplus and therefore power, so a burgeoning mind-world whispered of similar promise. That which was hunted and grown for food became the subject of worship. It became the life-giver, the savior. In the form of painted representation it became an idea which transcended the physical realm into the other place, the spirit-world, the invisible home of the soul into which death was the portal. Perhaps the sum of all human expression—technological, artistic, religious—can trace its origin to a single moment of clarity between near-human eyes staring into glassy water—the moment a mind cleaved itself from nature.

We’ve come a long way in a very short time. The standardly cited fulcrum is the Industrial Revolution, a mere 250 years ago. The chart graphing human consumption, reproduction and toxic emissions from that point on looks like a cartoonishly steep tidal wave looming over all

our tomorrows. Ever since, many constructively sane and criminally insane have been waving their hands, warning us that we're taking a long walk off a short pier. They cry that we have gone deaf. That seems to be the tone these days. Panic, desperation, delusion, denial. Through technological proliferation and our inextricable integration with it, our abstraction of death is now so thorough and complete that its sudden arrival falls over us like the shadow of some prehistoric terror. Our dependence on surplus and the powers that rule over it has been proven our greatest weakness. But for very few, we no longer are capable of providing for ourselves, for directly contributing to our own survival and the survival of those for whom we are responsible.

The system thrives on our unexamined dependence on it. The system, as it were, is the Shadow Mother and we the feeble children at her chaffed nipples, dimly aware of the in beauty we have forfeited for instead being coddled. This revelation is a profound, visceral injury to our pride, one from which the psyche staggers back and hides in the dark to protect itself from the compounding insult of closely assessing the trauma. Yet this is what must happen. The hard look in full sunlight at the wound. Tragically—perhaps catastrophically—this wound will fester in darkness while we fumble to put the fragments of our habituated, abstracted conceptions back together then sheepishly push them out into the light as decoys, only peeking out once in a while from hidden safety. We will not risk enough to be free.

A time traveler wandering deep into the misty mountains might find themselves greeted with outstretched hands holding a vessel of water which had been hummed and chanted over for days, purifying it for the intrepid visitor. Endlessly compelling is the geometric symmetry of fine sand formed on a screen when vibrated by harmonic frequencies and then is scattered and blurred by dissonant frequencies. More compelling still, is the same effect such frequencies have on

the molecular structure of water. Which begs the question: Are we not mostly water ourselves? What is humming and chanting over us?

Spring is returning and with it the sound of sandhill cranes, of rushing wind and water. Soon like a mother that low peal of thunder will vibrate through the atmosphere and lodge in our chests: *Go out there, child. It is dangerous. I love you, and you must go out there.*