# The Discovery of Slowness

A World in a Shell: Snail Stories for a Time of Extinctions
Thom van Dooren
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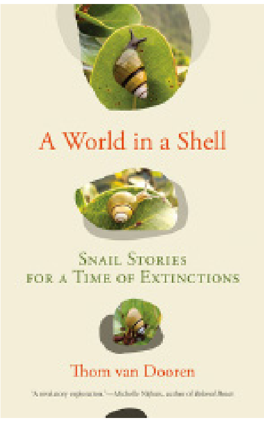
Unlike whales, wolves, condors, or tigers, invertebrates seldom make headlines. They don't excite tourists or trophy hunters. No one stalks bivalves with binoculars, and being called "spineless" is offensive. Yet this biological underclass comprises 95 percent of Earth's known animal species.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In *A World in a Shell: Snail Stories for a Time of Extinctions*, Thom van Dooren focuses exclusively on Hawai'i to examine the complex process by which we are losing one particular group of invertebrates: mollusks, despised as garden pests and symbols of sloth. His most trenchant metaphor, "the dull edge of extinction," deployed in previous work, describes species blinking out as a protracted, echoing dimming. It's never really a clean cut marked by the death of the last individual of a line, like George, that long-lived captive "endling" of the yellow-tipped O'ahu tree snail (*Achatinella apexfulva*) who became a celebrity too briefly in death. Lifeways unravel long before that final rupture, in ecological as much as societal contexts. And countless stakeholders feel ripple effects afterward.

Hawai'i's archipelago is home to more endangered animal species per square mile than any other place. Nine exclosures for rare snails on the island of O'ahu alone, designed like impenetrable escargot-farm fences, daunt predators that humans introduced: rats, chameleons, and the rosy wolfsnail, a biocontrol agent run amok, "vacuuming up everything." The state-and-federally-managed Snail Extinction Prevention Program also breeds and maintains populations harried by shell-collecting, heat waves, droughts, and forest transformations (brought about by horticulture, ranching, pineapple and sugarcane plantations, the timber trade, and tourist, urban, and military development). Helicopters ferry some to a lab trailer with greenhouse-like chambers acting as "an ark of sorts for their slimy inhabitants," van Dooren writes.

Thin-skinned "creatures that walk on their bellies," gastropods have been early victims of the Sixth Mass Extinction. Formerly, they were living gems glistening brightly, dangling from trees "like clusters of grapes" or, resembling patches of tweed, blending in with forest floor. About two-thirds of Hawai'i's 759 snail species — 99 percent of which occur nowhere else — may have vanished, most in the past century. Many others follow on their sticky heels, spiraling into oblivion.

Often serving as keystones or sentinels announcing change, "species that crawl, creep, buzz, and flutter" remain stepchildren of conservation. They're unseen, unsung, unassuming. Yet Hawai'i's snails fill an important niche: Ground snails eat leaf litter and recycle nutrients into the soil, while tree species rasp fungi and other microorganisms from leaf surfaces.

Snails open "a silvery pathway into many issues" for van Dooren, who is best known for his writings about birds. What is crucial, this trained environmental philosopher thinks, is "learning to see and value snails in new ways." He helps readers do so by sharing how land snails — "snot in a hat" — use slime to navigate and may have crossed oceans (most likely, by bird), as well as the surprising fact that some birth live offspring, mammal-like.

Van Dooren, honoring "what has been and most likely will still be lost," is at his strongest where he shows snail lives entangled with Kānaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiian, existence. Eschewing vertebrate-centric and ethnocentric biases, he ably transmutes aversion into admiration. *Mo'olelo* and *mele* (stories and chants) encode intimate bonds between Indigenous people and this charismatic mini-fauna. Native Hawaiians refer to young snails as *keiki*, or "children," and treat them with the same care in protective facilities. Tradition bearers gathering plants check every single leaf and evacuate *pūpū* [snails] to different ones. Their slime, "the source of the earth" in Kānaka Maoli creation myths, equals the primordial goo of biology. Snails, believed to sing by chirping, often accompany forest goddesses. They signal that all is well.

Biological erasure has its counterpart in the cultural. And the same economic-political system drives both. Extinction tales, for van Dooren, "allow us to acknowledge and even mourn; they can also be transformative, drawing us into new worlds, into appreciation, complexity, and responsibility," or, more actively, into "new forms of resistance and recuperation." In the case of Hawaiian snails, they highlight the continuing struggle for sanctuary and identity. They provide rallying points for defending *aloha 'āina*, the land's life force, its vitality. ■

— MICHAEL ENGELHARD