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## Eco-planetary pantheon: Environmental horror in Harlan Ellison's Deathbird Stories

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**Eco-planetary pantheon: Environmental horror in Harlan Ellison's *Deathbird Stories***

by

**Miles Rothlisberger**

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

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**ABSTRACT**

During the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, speculative fiction writer Harlan Ellison published a collection of short stories titled *Deathbird Stories* that perfectly accomplished and still accomplishes the goals of the movement. Following both the pre-established American tradition of the ecogothic and the patterns of the revolutionary “New Wave” era of science fiction, many stories in Ellison’s anthology set out to terrify and encourage ecological awareness in readers. These stories do this by featuring wrathful and unforgiving gods that represent nature – animal and nonanimal. These godly “ecological horrors” displace and alienate readers with their fantastical elements and graphic and brutal actions, thereby creating a painful yet memorable metaphor to force readers to see how those actions came about, often leading to reflection over reality. This reflection, then, leads to introspection, and allows Ellison to effectively reach and warn and advise his readers even today to think with caution and respect toward the environment that was once ravaged.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the world of science fiction, few authors are as infamous and controversial as the man who repeatedly never wanted to be known as a science fiction writer: Harlan Ellison. According to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, fellow science fiction (hereafter, abbreviated as sf) writer and personal friend Robert Silverberg described Ellison as “insecure, physically fearless, extraordinarily ambitious and hyperkinetic, dominating any room he entered,” going so far as to acknowledge “Harlan’s ability to dominate a conversation, even from three thousand miles away” (*Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*). Nat Segaloff begins his biography on Ellison, *A Lit Fuse: The Provocative Life of Harlan Ellison* (2017), by writing how “[Ellison] writes. Beautifully” while also writing how “he pisses people off” (Segaloff 1). The writer has been described by many interviewers, editors, and even friends or fellow writers as anything but dull or forgettable. Loud, brash, and sardonic, Ellison was a bombastic force inside and outside the sf community. He truly was an enfant terrible – a controversial and unconventional person prone to jarring, annoying, or embarrassing others.

Throughout his life, Ellison always pushed the boundaries on and off the pages he painstakingly wrote by manual typewriter, despite the prevalence of computers halfway through his career. During his brief time in the United States Army ranks from 1957 to 1959, Ellison wrote extensively during his training and duties as a Troop Information NCO – newspaper stories on-base, pulp stories to support himself and his then-wife Charlette, letters for his fellow soldiers’ loved ones, and eventually “things other than sf and mystery and crime and western...I wrote stories that I *wanted* to write, not ones I *had* to...stories that dealt with the real world but in fantastic terms or surreal terms” (qtd. in Segaloff 73-75). Much of his life was spent going

beyond expectations or necessity, showing that fearless bite so characteristic of him. Besides penning his way as a rising young writer in New York in the 1950s, Ellison (donning the name Phil “Cheech” Beldone) joined a Red Hook gang known as the “Barons” for ten weeks in 1954, going so far as to buy the right rag-tag clothes and a revolver to integrate well into their ranks, and soon afterward even integrated into another gang in the Manhattan Detention Complex after being arrested in 1960 for unlawful possession of a .22 rifle. Among other experiences like this, Ellison claims that he has also worked as “a tuna fisherman off the coast of Galveston, itinerant crop-picker down in New Orleans, hired gun for a wealthy neurotic, nitroglycerine truck driver in North Carolina, short-order cook, cab driver” (Sheehan).

However, his drive to constantly be expanding his own personal boundaries was often accompanied by his pushing of other people’s buttons and his testing of other people’s patience. Known for a mean streak in the courts, Ellison amassed countless lawsuits against those who’ve earned his ire directly. One of the most famous was when Ellison claimed that James Cameron’s *Terminator* and *Terminator 2* pilfered story and themes from his own “Demon with a Glass Hand” and “Soldier” episodes from *The Outer Limits* (Segaloff 195). He has also sued Usenet, AOL, and RemarQ (or even his own fans using the service) to combat e-book pirates (Frauenfelder). In the SyFy Channel’s episodes of *Harlan Ellison’s Watching*, the author went on diatribe after diatribe about topics spanning from political correctness to trading card companies. At a World Science Fiction Convention in the 1950s, the author (barely out of his teenage years) called famous sf author Isaac Asimov a “nothing” right to his face (qtd in Ellison, *Dangerous Visions* xxx). The fearless Ellison even punched his commanding officer in the army for volunteering him for kitchen duty and making him miss orientation, mailed a dead gopher to an editor, and rubbed his literary success in the face of a former creative writing teacher at Ohio

State University – who swore Ellison would never make it as a writer – by sending a copy of his published stories directly to said teacher (Segaloff 67). As Asimov later wrote, “Harlan uses his gifts for colorful and variegated invective on those who irritate him--intrusive fans, obdurate editors, callous publishers, offensive strangers” (Asimov). Even late in life, at the Hugo Award ceremony in 2006, Ellison earned infamy after groping sf and fantasy writer Connie Willis.

In short, Ellison’s life was full of conflict. He may have annoyed some and scared others, but his love of conflict also provided him with an unabashed commitment to fighting injustice. For instance, during the Civil Rights Movement, he marched in Selma to join the fight for equality, feeling a “compelling need to...walk the walk as well as talk the talk” after writing about racial issues for years in his fiction (qtd in Ellison, “Harlan Ellison remembers...”). In the early 1970s, Ellison supported F-310 gasoline, believing it cut pollution down, and immediately wrote articles apologizing and explaining how he had been “hoodwinked” by the Chevron Oil Company once it was revealed that the new gasoline was worthless in environmental efforts (Segaloff 164). As NPR journalist Jason Sheehan puts it, “His luck, his devilry, his style and violence. He lived like he had nothing to lose, and he wrote the same way” (qtd. in Sheehan). Because of his daring behavior, sf was never the same after efforts by Ellison and others. After serving in the U.S. army, with a dream for something unexpected that would push the envelope of sf with experimental stories touching on dark themes and worlds and taboos, Ellison edited and contributed a story to the groundbreaking *Dangerous Visions*, a 1967 anthology that was meant to be a “standing crystal mountain tall beside mimetic, naturalistic fiction, proffering visions and answers and what-ifs that no Faulkner or James Gould Cozzens or Edna Ferber ever thought possible” (Ellison, *Dangerous Visions* xviii). His repertoire in the New Wave of sf in the 1960s and the 1970s included many outlandish stories – from short stories about lone post-

nuclear bandits and their telepathic dog companions to teleplays that made it into *The Outer Limits* and *Star Trek* (although he hated “The City on the Edge of Forever” – the famous *Star Trek* episode he wrote – due to edits made on his script). These outlandish stories shocked and surprised readers, but they were also award winning: his more than 1700 stories, more than 75 edited or written books, and around two-dozen teleplays earned him eight Hugo Awards, four Nebula Awards, five Bram Stoker Awards, two Edgar Allen Poe Awards, among others. Eventually, in 2005, Ellison was named a Grand Master of Science Fiction, his name now immortalized alongside sf heavyweights such as Isaac Asimov, Ursula Le Guin, and Ray Bradbury. As Asimov admitted himself, “Harlan is a giant among men in courage, pugnacity, loquacity, wit, charm, intelligence – indeed, in everything but height” (qtd in Ellison, *Dangerous Visions* xxx).

Since the publication of *Dangerous Visions* – and, arguably, since Ellison’s decision to deviate from the norm – he became part of a subgenre of sf full of critical weight, serious themes and, most importantly, a sense of humanity. He writes in a column in his *An Edge In My Voice* how he will “make no grand statements about my fearlessness; it’s simply the way I’ve always done things and I have no control over it. Backed, however, my talent...I will expend the fullest measure of that talent in your behalf” (qtd in Ellison, *An Edge In My Voice* 10). Still, as a self-proclaimed “Elitist,” some of the reasoning behind the approach to his writing goes beyond simply entertaining. In a way, he seeks for his readers to ask the same questions and fight the same battles he does. He writes:

I believe that each of you has the spark of nobility and change...it is the remarkable men and women in every age who alter the condition of life for all of us, who move us away from the pit toward the stars... In each of you, in some

way, is the fire that we need to change the course of history. And to stoke that fire I will try to write of things and in ways that will get you aggravated enough to *think* (Ellison, *An Edge In My Voice* 11).

Ellison's tendency to stir American readers and force people to think fit with the times. Throughout Ellison's career as a ground-breaking and award-winning writer in the 1960s and 1970s, revolutions of all sorts, from racial to sexual to environmental, were changing the American status quo. With the rise of opposition to dated sexual stigmas and standards for both men and women came the rise of environmentalism. From industrial pollution by local zinc or steel-smelting industries, or the oil spill from the cracked *Torrey Canyon* oil tanker off the Santa Barbara coast, to war-related pollution such as the testing of the hydrogen bomb on Bikini and Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands a decade before and with aftereffects remaining afterward, the state of the environment ignited a general increase in awareness and interest in the "Greening of America" in the 1960s and 1970s (Gordon 1). In fact, environmental concern flourished following the end of World War II (which introduced fears of radioactive fallout that could devastate the landscape) and continued on into the era of the Vietnam or Second Indochina War (which included various forms of wartime destruction of the environment, from the bulldozing and savaging of the landscape by the American military, to the use of poisonous herbicidal weapons like Agent Orange or White, to the napalming and 14 million tons of bombing) (Brauer 46-50). Then came the rise of pollution in the waters and air of the United States that spawned the passing of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Federal Water Pollution Control Acts of the 1970s and that led to the publishing of bestsellers like Rachael Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* that argued for the outlawing of harmful pollutants like synthetic insecticides (Gordon 1). Writers like Carson pleaded with humanity to strive for a more ecologically

balanced future, for “Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth” (Carson 2).

As a man willing to break taboos and expectations, Ellison also channeled environmental concerns of the 60s and 70s in his writing, with much of his “environmentalist” speculative fiction appearing in a specific collection of short stories: *Deathbird Stories* (1975). Seen by critics as a fantastical collection of unrelenting pessimism and genuine concern over the human condition, this collection of short fiction begins with a foreword discussing the gods, and how they may be powerful and fearless, yet they all are victims to one rule: “When belief in a god dies, the god dies” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* xv). In *Deathbird Stories*, Ellison depicts numerous forces and commodities of the twentieth century – such as automobiles and urban crime – as modern gods.

However, alongside the Machine God and the God of Freudian Guilt, the Gods of Smog and pollution and the Gods of the Earth and animals and plants are present as well, vengefully and mysteriously intervening in the lives of humans. What this thesis argues is that many of these deities and figures – from the gargoyles in “Bleeding Stones” to the title characters in “The Deathbird” and “Rock God” – serve as a warning to careless humans who, through their urbanized and consumerist lives, harm their surroundings enough to justify karmic retribution, a visitation by some form of ecological horror or ecological monstrosity. However, this thesis will reveal how the bystanders and even the narrators – as they fearfully gaze at destruction and punishment and perceive them as the actions of the natural worlds’ “gods” – psychologically repress and deny their culpability in their own doom, pushing blame onto uncontrollable forces rather than on actions they themselves have committed.

In short, much of Ellison's pantheon – his collection of forces that make up key figures inside a select number of stories within *Deathbird Stories* – embodies and performs what I call in this thesis “ecological horror.” I define this type of horror in the context of Ellison's stories as a hybrid, combining the ecogothic or ecophobic tradition, the concept “cognitive estrangement,” and Rob Latham's position on sf environmentalism in the New Wave era. The ecogothic tradition (as defined by scholars such as Simon C. Estok, Dawn Keetley, and Matthew W. Sivils) in American literature involves stories that represent the “contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment,” with that agency spawning now just from dread of nature inherently but also from “failure of humans to control their lives and their world” (Keetley and Sivils 2-3). American fiction has often addressed America's colonial history through the ecogothic – the literary mode featuring nature's animal and nonsentient agents as embodying humankind's fear of nature – and this fiction includes sf. Many goals of the sf genre do not simply involve thrusting readers into the future, but – like the ecogothic – involve forcing them to face their own world in a new, alien, and sometimes unpleasant lens. Rob Latham notes in “Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction” how the New Wave of sf “adopted an anti-technocratic bent that put it at odds with the technophilic optimism of the larger social processes to which they had been conjoined in the service of state and corporate power” (Latham 490). This environmentalist strain of New Wave sf parallels the ecogothic, and shows how authors prevalent in the New Wave era such as Ellison dipped into the ecogothic tradition of non-sf authors for their own creations. The purpose behind this ecological horror for stories like those in Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* is to perform an act of cognitive estrangement on the reader. Written about by sf scholar Darko Suvin, cognitive estrangement in sf aims to provide a world so alien and yet still built on preexisting knowledge of the world, forcing readers

to question their own world, and even what could possibly happen in the future. This thesis will argue that Ellison's ecological horror is itself meant to use personified nature to not only shock readers, but to also bring awareness to humankind's fear of nature through the stories' portrayal of nature and its interactions with humanity. By forcing readers to see the natural world being represented by a pantheon of wrathful deities that fights back against humankind, Ellison also forces readers to look into their own version of the natural world to explain why they feel that fear. This portrayal of nature might, then, convince them – specifically Americans – that some of that fear stems from America's collective, suppressed guilt over its own actions against nature.

*Deathbird Stories* perpetuated the ecogothic in popular culture when it was published during a time of environmentalism. Because of its ecogothic tendencies, one could argue that Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* reached a particularly widespread audience that was open-minded to the concepts of change and ecological awareness. With that said, this thesis brings these ideas into the relevant present-day realm of sf and environmental criticism – a realm where environmentalism is still works to tackle issues related to a ravaged, polluted world caused by reckless human activity. Environmentalists' fight for change continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and while issues such as climate change permeate Americans' minds, there still exists a struggle for some environmental awareness. A 2016 Gallup poll indicated that, compared to 78 percent of Americans who identified themselves as environmentalists, only 48 percent did in 2016, with the decline possibly due to anything from the higher partisanship surrounding environmentalism to decreases in concern toward certain issues like pollution (Jones). Even religious views can dampen the fires of environmentalism, with studies showing how compared to more secular beliefs, Christianity, Islam, and other faiths with the concept of the afterlife potentially led to less concern or urgency toward climate or environmental matters (Hope and Jones 51-56). Also,

Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* – while award-winning – has not garnered the same kind of attention as other sf pieces. Much scholarship, such as Chris Pak's *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* (2016), has focused on sf that depicts non-Earth planets, such as *Dune* (1965) and its depiction of Eurocentric colonial tendencies through the colonization and revolution on the desert planet Arrakis. Other scholars, such as Alice Curry in her book *Environmental Crisis In Young Adult Fiction* (2013), focus on the more current sf – oftentimes young adult fiction, such as the hugely popular *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015) series.

However, scholars have addressed the idea that Ellison's worlds deserve recognition for their themes of judgment, flawed humanity, and self-reflection. In Peter Malekin's "The Fractured Whole: The Fictional World Of Harlan Ellison," Malekin touches broadly on Ellison's work (and includes *Deathbird Stories*) and does bring up the idea that "Harlan Ellison's fantasy produces in the readers a shocking confrontation of themselves they would prefer to ignore" (Malekin 21). He writes how a "dual-motif" of reality and fantasy or "'normality' versus violence" work together in a way that brings more credibility and weight to both the fantastical and realistic parts of the story (Malekin 22). Jeremy Withers addresses the religious symbolism in another famous piece of Ellison's, "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," in his article "Medieval and Futuristic Hells: The Influence of Dante on Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream." Withers writes how Ellison borrowed, among other classic tales, "Dante's canonical poem about justice and torment" to create his own sf tale that would judge the dichotomous nature of humankind (Withers 6). With these scholars in mind, one can find that *Deathbird Stories* holds the potential to be a critical ecogothic piece, with worlds of fantasy and sf working in tandem to use gods of nature as fictional stand-ins for real-life consequences onto

and from the natural world. Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* behaves just as unflinchingly as Ellison in its messages and purposes, and it deserves a spot alongside other pieces of environmental fiction as it still serves a purpose today in estranging and impacting its readers just as it did almost fifty years ago.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE BASILISK AND DOG-GODS OF WAR AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

With Ellison representing wrathful nature through certain key figures in his pantheon of modern-day gods in *Deathbird Stories*, animal life becomes a focal point for Ellison's efforts of ecological horror and the influence humankind has inflicted onto animals, and potentially vice-versa. Even at the start of the collection, there is a "short story" composed of micro-stories called "From A to Z, In the Sarsaparilla Alphabet," where all manner of mythological creatures are represented for some letters – from kelpie to oni to phoenix – and even actual animals like the echidna and raven. While many of the stories implement animals in a metaphorical sense, some directly address animals as a force that represents nature – and the relationship humankind does or even potentially *could* have. From these stories, the animal-gods in Ellison's macabre pantheon crawl from war-centric tales like "Basilisk" or classics like *Vic and Blood* (itself outside of the collection, but highly related and worth mentioning in connection to...?) and the titular story of the collection, "The Deathbird."

Situated within the first third of Ellison's short story collection is a clear depiction of animalistic ecological horror with the basilisk in the short story "Basilisk." Prefaced as a "god of war" (or at least an agent or dog of it) and a killer of victors – even those that defeat it – the basilisk stands as one of the more indirect forces of frightening nature and karmic justice to punish humans (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 121). Within the story, the basilisk "recruits" Vietnam Lance Corporal Vernon Lestig, after he "fell into a trail trap set by hostiles," and suffered under all sorts of torture in a hooch under Vietnamese soldiers – so much so under the sharpened bamboo and painful hangings that he eventually "could not manufacture tears" – until

he revealed his comrades' locations and other pertinent information right before the hooch's soldiers likely fell victim to the basilisk and "died horribly, most peculiarly, sickeningly...musta been some terrible disease" (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 126-127). With Lestig – the survivor seen by others as a soldier who betrayed his comrades before his captors' deaths – standing in as a representation of humankind as well as the destructive forces that emanate from the basilisk, the shunned Lestig returns home and attempts contact with others, including past loved ones, before he "felt the power and the fury pulsing in him, felt his eyes glowing, felt the death that lay on his tongue" (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 137). Lestig, after killing others merely with his stare that would call upon "the deathbeast," and after forcing hostages by the Soldiers and Sailors Monument to crawl, dies by bullet-fire and is buried unceremoniously as the basilisk abandons him and returns to its "Armed One" master (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 139).

This short story presents itself as an ecological horror – and thus spearheads the ecological efforts of *Deathbird Stories* – with the use of the mythological "basilisk" as the primary force of nature manipulating one man – Lestig – as well as mankind overall, due to its direct killing of many of Lestig's foes that he confronts. The basilisk, the "king of snakes" and what Ellison describes as the "gap-mawed...death-breath dragon beast," is both a figure of godly power as well as an agent of nature taking on religious proportions and abilities (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 124). Ellison establishes the ancientness and abilities of the basilisk early on, once it encounters and recruits Lestig after the man "fell into a trap [of poisoned punji stakes] set by hostiles" in the jungles of Vietnam (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 124). Ellison describes the beast as a "never-sleeping guardian of faith," much like one would describe an angelic or godly force (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 124). Ellison further continues to emphasize that the basilisk transcends corporeal understanding, for it "passed through the final veils of confounding time

and space and dimension” in order to meet Lestig and fulfill the order given by its master and “the order to the darkside universe” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 124-125). A “deadly million eyes of a nameless god” serve as the “green diamonds” that “burn up” from the skin of basilisk, as “Rubies gorged with the water-thin blood of insects sealed in amber from the dawn of time pulsed there;” Ellison depicts the creature as one of higher power, age, and purpose, in other words (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 124).

Yet much of the basilisk’s descriptions and even ability to communicate with Lestig in such a place serve to show readers that the basilisk functions as a snake-like agent of vengeful nature too. H.J. Rob Lenders and Ingo Janssen note in their article “The Grass Snake and the Basilisk: From Pre-Christian Protective House God to the Antichrist” how the European grass snake became the face and inspiration for the basilisk due to the snake’s behavior and past religious connotations. Lenders and Janssen note how, due to the grass snake’s tendency to nest its eggs in cow dung during humankind’s agricultural stages – and due to grass snakes’ overall physiology of shedding skin, unblinking eyes, and non-venomousness – they were heralded as symbols of both fertility and death, rebirth, agricultural success, and guardians of wealth before Christianity (Lenders and Janssen 328). However, Lenders also notes how, with the introduction of Christianity, the grass snake – along with other snakes – became a victim under the religion’s attempt at demonizing idols and natural icons to make only one accepted god. With this knowledge, the golden scales of the grass snake along with its dung nest and its tendency to hiss and stare became the basilisk’s terrifying trademarks. These trademarks are its crown, its affiliation with rooster eggs (for roosters often frequented dung piles in pastoral properties), and its ability to kill with its stare and poison (Lenders and Janssen 336). Ellison’s beast parallels Lenders’s history of the basilisk – pre and post Christianity – and therefore stands as a true king

of snakes, or even other beasts. With “eyes of oil-slick pools, ultraviolet death colors smoking in their depths” and “Corded silk-flowing muscles sliding beneath the black hairless hide,” along with “Golden jewels changing from instant to instant” adorning it, the basilisk in the short story still appears as a tangible being of animalistic muscle and primal biology – specifically the grass-snake’s – in addition to its incomprehensible godliness. However, under that “flashmaze kaleidoscope of flesh” and muscle and scales, Ellison’s basilisk also features paws that it pads with, something that sounds feline- or canine-like. Still, these appendages – which it uses to test and press against the punji stakes that Lestig fell into, and to even send a “dark, steaming serum” to mingle with the “Oriental poison” in the stakes – serve to show that Ellison’s basilisk is not just a “king of snakes,” but an animal- assemblage made up of several different creatures (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 124). Ellison’s basilisk also materializes – or “is born” or “hatched,” in a way – in an environment of decay and disgust: a trap of poisoned bamboo shoots, where Lestig experiences pain that felt as though “Every circuit shorted out, every light bulb blew...vomit burned tracks through throats, hymens were torn, fingernails bent double dragged down blackboards...lava. Nova pain” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 123). With the mixture of both godly and animalistic characteristics, Ellison’s basilisk serves as *Deathbird Stories*’ first depiction of a horrific and vengeful God of Animals.

Already, with the mixture of beastly and Ellison’s use of the basilisk in “Basilisk” serves as an ecological horror that unearths the consequences from a monumental historical and ecological event: the Vietnam or Second Indochina War. “It is axiomatic that warfare is detrimental to the environment,” for the nature held within the theater of war can only suffer under humankind consuming resources, polluting with weapons, and trampling over its unspeaking victims (qtd in Kristofersen, *Ecological Consequences* 88). The Vietnam War, like

any war, took its toll as America “engaged in ‘massive rural area bombing, extensive chemical and mechanical forest destruction, wide-ranging chemical anti-personnel harassment area denial, and enormous forced population displacement’” (Brauer 46). With this clear devastation of the general environment came the fatal aftershock to the fauna that lived in the vibrant jungles, for “...any of the various operations that decimate the vegetative cover concomitantly decimate the sources of food and shelter of the associated animal life” (*Ecological Consequences* 71).

According to a 1970 study of the environmental effects of the war on Vietnam’s wildlife by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, titled “Ecological Effects of the War in Vietnam,” everything from high-explosive munitions to land clearing to chemical weapons such as herbicides to defoliate and increase fatalities were “extremely destructive, both of human lives and environment. Our own observations showed the profound effects of denuding the country of growth” (qtd in Orians and Pfeiffer 553). While the American weapons on Vietnam obviously decimated the vegetation, animal life also suffered casualties. For example, during the study, in “the defoliated areas we did not see a single species of insectivorous or frugivorous bird with the exception of barn swallows, *Hirundo rustica*, which are migrants from the north” (qtd in Orians and Pfeiffer 548). Many animals such as fishing birds suffered under the effect of herbicides such as 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (or 2,4-D), and many became highly susceptible to near-extinction. While some mammals were able to evade the devastation from the war, according to the study, “The only other vertebrate we [researchers Orians and Pfeiffer] saw in the defoliated areas was a large crocodile *Crocodylus* on the bank of a small channel” (qtd in Orians and Pfeiffer 548). Really, “the normally rich avian fauna that populates the mangroves was decimated. Moreover, population levels of the aquatic fauna, both vertebrate and invertebrate...were also found to reduced” (*Ecological Consequences* 72). Because he had

knowledge of the horrific consequences of the Vietnam War (which occurred in his lifetime), Ellison's representation of nature through the mythological basilisk makes sense. As a deathbeast that represents all sorts of animal life as it exhibits snake-or-reptile-like skin, dog-like behavior, and even bird-like qualities (for it is described as a "dragon beast" as well, and can disappear almost as though it were capable of flight), the basilisk can be seen as an ecological horror that resurfaces the plight of animals during the Vietnam War. The fact that the story and the beast center around a Vietnam veteran confirms this fact, and Lestig's demands at the end of the story for his human victims to "crawl" and suffer the animalistic torture he faced serves as torturous punishment from the ecological horror. The humans must grovel and suffer like the animals that suffered under American occupation of Vietnam – like the animals or agents of nature that the basilisk and Lestig champion. Therefore, through his strange and grotesque fantasy using the basilisk and the horrors of the war, Ellison shows and warns for the sake of the future, foretelling about the inevitable horrors and their harbingers.

Keeping in mind the basilisk and Lestig's serving as agents of nature and ecological horrors spawned by Vietnam War, one may be curious as to why the basilisk's "recruits" Lestig, an incapacitated soldier and eventually a blind, shunned Vietnam War veteran known for his traitorous actions toward the American forces. The beast never fully possesses or commandeers the wounded soldier – for Ellison notes that "The basilisk had not come from the vampires, nor were his powers those of the blood drinkers," for the beast does not force the human to become his slave or follow his demands (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories*, 125). In fact, throughout much of the story, Lestig does not follow the cryptic orders of the basilisk, but instead behaves independently and understandably attempts to make contact with his parents, his ex-girlfriend Terry, and his sister Neola (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 124-125). It is not until Lestig experiences

his own personal moments of rage – such as when he discovers his ex-girlfriend’s marriage to another man and her shame toward him, or when he goes berserk after being ambushed by the relatives of other Vietnam veterans – or until Lestig remembers how he “crawled” in the “monkey cage where they kept him boxed for endless days and nights” until he relinquished intel to America’s enemy – that the veteran would feel animalistic. In these moments, “somewhere great corded muscles flexed, a serpentine throat lifted, talons flashed against the wall” and he would see the eyes of a “monstrous creature;” only in moments of agitation, where Lestig’s humanity would be tested, would the veteran call upon the fury and poisonous, melting glare of the basilisk, from himself or even a deathbeast that lurks in the shadows near him as a fellow product of war (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 132, 137). However, this recruitment of sorts – where a mythical god of animals recruits or even alters the abilities of a human, yet still keeps the human’s agency intact – sets the precedent for the godly eco-nightmares that Ellison peppers throughout the other selected short stories in *Deathbird Stories*. Through Lestig as a victim under the control of his basilisk overseer and “influence,” Ellison begins to represent Latham’s “obverse of colonialism and conquest” – and the obverse of the manipulation of nature and animals – as both a sign of the destructive forces that can spawn from the wrath of nature, and simultaneously as a diagnosis of humankind’s misunderstanding and deflection of its own actions that helped cause the carnage incurred by the wrath of nature.

First of all, with Lestig serving as more of a victim of the basilisk’s methods than as someone who completely accepts and condones them, he becomes the first example of nature’s power as well as a catalyst for it. Lestig’s helplessness as he “faints to the pain” of the punji stakes in the Vietnamese trap already places him in a strange, torturous, semi-conscious state of unawareness and unintelligence: “his brain went dead refusing to accept the load; all senses came

to full stop...and fainted, simply directly fainted with the pain” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 123). So, as Lestig first encounters the oily dark beast and the beast becomes a part of him and “recruits” him by supposedly mingling its essence with the poison within the trap’s stakes, an unmasked symbiotic relationship occurs. This, of course, represents an inverse of the usual relationship between nature/animals and humankind found within pre-New Wave sf stories. Normally, according to Latham, the Golden Age of colonial sf showed a pattern where “humanity was destined to get the better of any and all alien species” – advanced or even more animalistic (or even whole ecosystems) – and where ambitious and bold imperial impulses would be rewarded or corrected in the end (Latham 488). In fact, during this period, reverse-colonial situations like the one that the Lestig-basilisk relationship sets up (such as Robert Heinlein’s slug parasites brainwashing U.S. citizens in his *The Puppet Masters*) were foiled and thus reinforced colonial, pro-ecosystem-manipulating tendencies (Latham 488). In the Lestig-basilisk relationship, however, the basilisk takes the lead and, as mentioned before, “recruits” the human veteran, allowing the god of animals (and nature overall) to become the more manipulative and dominant agent. By taking advantage of Lestig’s vulnerable state of pain and anguish, something brought on by both humankind as well as natural objects (like the sharpened bamboo stakes, and the poison added to it), the basilisk also becomes a powerful entity within Ellison’s pantheon; already, Ellison reveals the effectiveness and prevalence of nature and animalism as it intrudes upon its very first victim (and the basilisk’s last) within the story.

Once touched by the beast, the prevalence of nature as an ever-present force in Lestig, “brother to the basilisk,” further shows the overlooking shadow cast by a natural force, and again further shows nature’s defeat of capitalist forces that often oversee colonial efforts in sf, or any colonial effort that normally manipulates nature. Lestig repeatedly sees the basilisk’s form, and

while oftentimes he himself feels the fury of the basilisk flowing through him as he becomes a deadly force who can cause the faces of others to melt and rot by merely looking at them, oftentimes Ellison hints at a separate basilisk that kills others around Lestig, further proving the veteran's submissive position and powerlessness under his new protectors and overseers. After returning home to Kansas after being relieved from the hospital and court early in the story, as Lestig stands by the Rock Island Line and awaits to return home, "Somewhere else, through another mist, a great beast sat haunch-back, dripping chromatic fire... Watching, breathing, waiting for Lestig's vision to clear." In this passage, as Lestig waits, so does the basilisk – possibly his own abilities, dormant, or possibly another alongside him in brotherhood (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 128). At one point Lestig stares off "at the shadows till his eyes played tricks and he thought he saw little speckles of light dancing... Then the light glimmers changed... he seemed to be staring first into a mirror, and then into the eyes of some monstrous creature," indicating both his own monstrousness as well as a potential second basilisk (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 136). Also, when Lestig attacks someone who tries to attack him in a church, Ellison writes how Lestig "*Looked* at him. As the deathbeast struck." Once again, while Lestig causes many deaths from his own stare, there still are cryptic references of a basilisk hovering, guarding, or potentially monitoring the veteran as he moves about (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 137). Regardless, the dominance of nature, the god of animals, over humankind rears itself clearly through Ellison's depiction of the basilisk's recruitment of the anguished, weakened veteran, and does so to show nature's wrath, and to reverse the usual tradition of humankind domineering, manipulating, and watching over a subjugated nature.

With Lestig as a "brother to the basilisk," and as a catalyst for carnage planned by the darkside universe (for "It was not by chance that the basilisk's master had sent him to recruit

Lance Corporeal Vernon Lestig”), the god of animals can show its true face and purpose as also a god of war by pinning the veteran against mankind. The basilisk pins human against human, initially, by giving Lestig his independence, and thus time to embrace his animalistic impulses and renounce his human peers and his own humanity. Lestig, throughout the story, never directly encounters the basilisk again; outside of the hints at the basilisk lurking and potentially acting alongside Lestig, it supposedly lurks in the shadows once the twin wounds that the veteran sustained from the stake trap “were gone” from the beast’s serum, and after “the basilisk sprang up into nothing and was gone. Was gone” – with the final pact and presence of the basilisk sealed into Lestig just as his wounds were sealed (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 125). Despite its superiority and even its intimacy with the veteran, the basilisk never pressures, coerces, or forces Lestig to commit atrocities; at the end of the story, “he did not know the name of the God he served” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 139). As stated earlier in this chapter, Lestig only exhales his death breath as a deathbeast when something threatening or bleak tests his own humanity and restraint, much like how the hooch’s torturous methods tested him. At times, he becomes animalistic and basilisk-like – or even monkey-like, with Ellison describing the veteran “like a monkey on a stick” when trying to keep his balance – when threatened physically by strangers (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 131). Much like direct, physical parallels to his time in the hooch, when something threatens his life or physical well-being in the story, he reacts, such as when he merely travels through his hometown of Wichita and as “someone grabbed him from behind” and held a weapon, and Lestig “strained to see...strained...And then the shape [man] screamed...and both hands clawed at the head...” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 131). He behaves the same way when men came into the church where Lestig met to talk with his sister Neola, where “They came for him and vaulted the pews...They jumped and beat him...,” and where

Lestig reacted as he “*Looked* at him. As the deathbeast struck. The man screamed, clawed his face...and Lestig suddenly remembered what had happened at the hooch, remembered breathing and looking...and he breathed deeply and exhaled in their faces and stared at them across the evil night...and they shrieked and died and he was all alone once more” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 137). Lestig allows himself to remember his first death breath and looking moment from the hooch – where he relinquished his humanity by betraying his comrades and mercilessly killing his enemies – when threatened in a similar scenario. However, he also allows himself to become the basilisk brother in other moments of high stress and – most importantly – when his ability to retain some form of restraint, sanity, or even human determination to progress forward is tested. “His vision fogged...and in that moment rage sluiced through him” as his ex-girlfriend Terry rejected him from her home without so much as a “sorry” or “goodbye,” and “the drago-breath deathbeast eased sinuously to its feet and began treading down...A soft, expectant purring came from its throat, and its terrible eyes burned with joy” when he learns of where his sister lives but is, once again, rejected any semblance of kindness or farewell from Terry (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 135). He feels the same way, and even kills men who attempt to kill him, after feeling stinging rejection and bitterness from his own sister. In all cases, Lestig never chooses to reach into himself to call upon his inner hyper-animalistic abilities, but instead allows them to bubble or surface whenever he must grasp at patience and humanity in the face of those who physically or mentally test him and call him out for inhuman, traitorous actions. After his sister’s rejection especially, he remembers “Crawling across a dirt floor” like an animal, how the hooch’s torturers yelled “Crawl! Crawl and perhaps we will let you live!” and how he did, in fact, crawl – “...and he crawled...God how he crawled...if he could have crawled around the world on both bloody hands and one foot...he would have crawled, just to sleep, just to stop the arrows of pain...he

would have crawled to the center of the earth and drunk the menstrual blood of the planet” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 136).

Lestig is forced to remember his betrayal and how he became an animal – relinquishing all human reputation and responsibilities by betraying his comrades, but also relinquishing his humanity by crawling and willing to become one with the earth, as seen before, to simply sleep and cease to think or feel. He remembers all of that with all the physical fights with people who “went out searching for the filthy traitor who killed their sons and husbands and brothers,” and in all the mental strains where loved ones emotionally pierce Lestig and shame him with questions like “why did you *do* it?” or “Why did you come back?...Why did you do this to us” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 134-137). Ellison purposefully allows Lestig to incidentally embrace his animalism on his own – with the basilisk and its master to take more supportive, distant roles without coercion or force upon Lestig – in order to further bolster his established eco-nightmare within the story, and to lay the foundations for other stories in the short story collection. Lestig, while imbued with destructive death breath and death stare, acts more? in retaliation to humankind and its cruelty than by the unprovoked whims of the god of animals. Not only that, Lestig retaliates as a representation of nature against not necessarily just humans, but against the constructs of humanity, and its over-ambitious and violent, invasive tendencies. Already, one knows that others shaming him for not participating in the Vietnam War (an exercise of invasive and colonial activity, for the United States injected itself into an inter-Vietnamese conflict, occupying the country and its land for years) honorably under the constructed codes of war led to Lestig’s eventual mental breakdown. Lestig – and thereby his brother and master, the gods of animal and war – wage conflict against the human constructs of invasion and colonization throughout the story. This “nature vs humankind” war becomes apparent with a bloody,

climactic stand-off and slaughter of an angry mob at the manic Lestig's hands at the end of the story. Initially, Lestig "stood on the Soldiers and Sailors Monument high above them, where he had huddled all through the night, at the feet of a World War I doughboy." He stands tall in a place where he, traditionally, sat at the feet of a human statue like a dog, not only mirroring the position of the basilisk's master and the basilisk (for "the Helmet-Headed One sat on his throne, high above all, with the basilisk at his feet"), but thereby accepting and digging into his animalism illuminated by his basilisk brother (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 138-139). Then, he becomes the personification and catalyst for the wrath of nature, in this case the god of animals, as he "looks" at people as he "cut them down," had a man's face "burned away, smoking pustules of ruined flesh where his eyes had been" (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 138). Through Lestig and his breath and stare, nature's wrath targets the mob, humans who embraced and accepted militaristic imperialism – an anti-nature force – that suppressed and shunned humankind's animal roots with its warfare and willingness to invade and conquer human beings as it did nature. As the U.S. warred with its enemy in Vietnam, the soldiers made its enemies into "parodic, grotesque imitations of humans instead" – in a treatment similar to the one certain alien races and ecologies in colonizer pre-New Wave sf stories faced – and those enemies would include traitors such as Lestig (Latham 488). This treatment Lestig attacks most, yelling to the mob "I'll show you!...You never know, patriots! You live all the time and you say one thing or another, all your rules about what it takes to be brave, but you never *know*..." (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 138). He even specifically calls them "patriots" in order to directly attack the colonial, domineering construct embedded within humanity. Then, as an agent of the basilisk and animalism, he does what the basilisk had done to him earlier and subverts the man-nature dichotomy and forces the mob under fear of death to crawl, yelling "Get down on your knees and

crawl patriots! Crawl to me and maybe I'll let you live. Get down like animals...Crawl and learn it's better to *live*, any way at all, to stay alive..." (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 138-139). His wrath further dismantles the harmful impulses of mankind and tries to dominate with animality, as well as natural impulses of life and appreciation of life – impulses teased out of him in the hooch, and associated with the basilisk afterwards, for these would trigger his breath and stare.

So, the product of human impulses – which had the potential or were already anti-nature – incurred the wrath of Ellison's god of animals (or more accurately the god of anti-humans, and the god of war *against humans*). That wrath, then, led to brutal slaughter. Ellison thus sets the stage for a niche pantheon of nature gods that attack humankind, and he thus sends the first warning to readers about the consequences that can occur due to unrepentant imperialist actions. In this case, these anti-nature, unrestricted actions can even make other humans turn feral and represent nature's anger in catastrophic ways. As this story suggests, humans are themselves animals once they refuse to abide by human-constructed standards, impulses, or expectations.

However, Ellison uses this story to also set precedent for another, potentially bleaker outcome: the diagnosis of human rejection of accountability toward their impact on their environment. Throughout the story, Ellison writes how Lestig became the embodiment of animalism and nature through a mythical beast instead of any actual, realistic creature. Also, throughout the story, there are references to "the Helmeted One," or "Mars, the Eternal One, the God Who Never Dies, the Lord of Futures..." and how he watched Lestig's efforts from afar and even "smiled" (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 139). While Lestig became an actor against his peers all on his own, the spark that allowed him to do so – the gift of death and power by nature itself – was granted by a fictional god of nature of Ellison's manufacturing. With this in mind, one could argue that Ellison – or the narrator – delegitimizes the eco-nightmare being constructed by

fictionalizing the ecological plausibility of the story. One could argue that a story about a fictional god of nature would then also delegitimize the seriousness and impact of the potential calamity posed at the end. These arguments are initially well-founded: Ellison exaggerates at least the immediate impact that man-made environmental missteps could have by personifying ecology or nature as mythological deities. However, Ellison personifies nature – in “Basilisk” and in the other stories – to establish a realistic allegory for the displacement of accountability that can occur when people are faced with blow-back from their actions. With Ellison serving as a close observer, by representing otherwise faceless (or more accurately inhuman, alien, voiceless) nature as relatable concepts such as fate or – in the case of “Basilisk” and its deities – gods already familiar to people, such as the god of war (commonly known as Ares by many), Ellison becomes another character. This character, as human as Neola and Terry and as human as Lestig used to be, makes a choice just as Lestig does, but instead attempts to rationalize imperialist human traits rather than abandon them as Lestig did. The narrator shirks any sort of personal responsibility or accountability for the fatal standoff (and death) of Lestig by blaming the actions of Lestig on the subtle string-pulls of an uncontrollable and incomprehensible god, what with him referring to the god of war at the very end of the story as though he serves as the manipulative puppet-master after all. The survivors at the end of “Basilisk” follow the narrator’s sentiments, for “They buried the body in an unmarked grave, and no one talked of it” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 139). The humans that Lestig tried to harshly teach not only unceremoniously bury the veteran without any indication of guilt or shame, but then never discuss anything about the whole scenario, from the veteran’s basilisk and animal-god abilities to the veteran’s indictment of “patriots.” Thus, with such an anticlimactic ending, Ellison also serves a warning, one that points to humankind’s repression of its fault in already frightful ecological nightmares.

“Basilisk” is one of the standout stories in Ellison’s collection, not only for the signature, bleak portrayal of the human-nature relationship, but also for standing out as one of the only animal-centric pieces in the collection. One of the most prevalent words in “Basilisk” involves not just animalistic imagery, but specifically doggish and even snake imagery. Throughout the short story, from the monster being described as a “deathbeast” (with “beast” giving more mammalian connotations more so than more innocuous terms like “monster”) and “faithful mastiff” to a creature with “Lizard dragon beast” with a “black hairless hide,” the story makes it clear that the animal-god is inspired by specific animals other than just the mythological basilisk (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 124, 139). At the end of the story, even, Lestig demands townsfolk to “Get down on your knees and crawl...Get down like animals and crawl on your bellies...,” paying homage to the phrase “beg like a dog,” and how God forced the serpent in the Garden of Eden to crawl on its belly for eternity to pay for tempting Eve and Adam to eat the forbidden fruit (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 138). This doggish or snakelike animality in “Basilisk” and even other Ellison stories is not just meant to serve as general animal-kind’s overt revenge toward humankind. Specifically, Lestig and the Basilisk’s doggish characterizations cannot be understated as a representation of animalism in Ellison’s fiction, for dogs (and specifically “dogs of war”) reoccur in another story, “The Deathbird,” and even stories outside of *Deathbird Stories*. This animality represented through dogs and dog-like transformations in humans, for example, becomes a central theme in one of Ellison’s later trilogies, *Vic and Blood: The Chronicles of A Boy and His Dog*. “The Deathbird,” an unorthodox smattering of seemingly unrelated stories that connect Nathan Stack before and after the near-end of the world, makes equally unorthodox connections between “god” and “dog.” *Vic and Blood*, published in 1969 still during the environmentalism movement’s heyday yet preceding *Deathbird Stories*, features

the roving human Vic and his telepathic war-dog Blood as they roam through. This pair of stories carries on to show that the dog-like symbolism in “Basilisk” was highly intentional, with Ellison showing how ecological horror can be avoided with such a relationship with animals and nature if that relationship is maintained. However, this relationship in the stories still brings out ecological horrors, for humankind was too late in establishing these bonds.

Blood’s relationship with Vic, preceding both “Basilisk” and “The Deathbird,” sets the precedent for positive ecological bonds to curb ecological horror. Throughout the entire *Vic and Blood* novella, Blood does not serve Vic so much as he aids him as an almost-equal partner, if not totally as an equal. He helps the “solo” Vic in many ways to help them both survive the post-apocalypse, and to show how nature truly domineers as a force to be reckoned with. Throughout the novella, Blood constantly serves as not only a physically capable companion, but also a mental one as well. As a voice of conscience, Blood tries to persuade Vic to not kill himself; in the chapter “A Boy and His Dog,” arguably the most famous of the chapters in the novella, Blood not only alerts Vic of nearby solos that might kill him, but he also tries to warn Vic from being distracted with a “nit chick,” Quilla June, and allowing himself to potentially be killed. As a voice of knowledge, throughout the novella, Blood explains to Vic different phrases and words and concepts, and even tests him on knowledge to keep him thinking (as he does in the chapter “Eggsucker,” where he tests Vic on the names of the old U.S. Presidents). Blood even gives Vic a sense of authority and importance by allowing him to think that he found Blood and that he was Blood’s “master,” narrating in “Eggsucker”: “A little self-delusion goes a long way to keeping one’s pet human in line” (Ellison, *Vic and Blood: Stories* 88).

Already, Ellison establishes how important animality is in his stories through Blood, and this relationship is almost akin to that between soldiers and war-dogs, specifically soldiers and

war-dogs who took part in the Vietnam War. In the book *None Came Home: The War Dogs of Vietnam*, author Sgt. John O'Donnell chronicles his experiences with his K-9 companion King, who helped him traverse and survive the ragged terrain and horrific jungle warfare in the Vietnamese wilderness (O'Donnell). At one point, O'Donnell mentions how useful King and other dogs are for even sniffing out enemies, writing how

...nobody should ever 'see' us, until it's too late. 'Charlie' is so spooked by K-9's ability, anyway, that they'll do anything to get away from us... Their only friend was the surprise element, at night. Well. K-9 takes their 'surprise' and gives them one back. The 'night' is ours and the 'VC' knows they lost it from the first moment K-9 step foot here...very rarely can 'Charlie' attempt any of that [ambush] silliness with any reliability or effect (O'Donnell 137).

The text chronicles the reliance and friendship between O'Donnell and King, and this relationship parallels Vic and Blood's. Both dogs help with combat and general surviving in hostile nature. Ellison clearly, in using dogs in *Vic and Blood*, and even in "Basilisk" and "The Deathbird," extends some modicum of hope to readers, showing that positive and symbiotic relationships with nature's children and agents could be beneficial.

This important relationship for humanity's survival comes out when Blood's importance truly shines in "Eggsucker," when he helps Vic avoid an environmental hazard: a radioactive screamer pit. In the chapter, Blood helps Vic to actually avoid something that he otherwise couldn't, for "...he was too juiced to even see it. But then, humans can't see the greenish-blue radiation haze as well as we noble creatures can" (Ellison, *Vic and Blood: Stories* 319). Blood is forced to yell out at Vic to help him avoid the crater of radiation and toxicity. Once Vic avoids it,

Vic and even readers face the alternative result if Vic had abandoned caution like other humans.

From the pit:

...there was the king awful ugliest screamer I've ever seen, oozing green slime and his parts falling off like some medieval drawing of a rotting flagellant or a leper, nothing but bitten fingernails all the way back to the knuckles, and eyelashes as long as spider legs, and big whirling eyes without eyelids, his mouth open and yelling with the pain of his burns, groping and clutching trying to climb out of the pit (qtd from Ellison, *Vic and Blood: Stories* 326).

Outside of Blood's knowledge, he actually works with the screamer to help Vic and the readers face the tragedy of war-time environmental damage. With the grotesque imagery of the screamer – with traits likely due to bomb radiation or even toxic waste – the real damage to the environment jumps out through another human being. Without the aid of a natural companion like Blood, Vic would have faced the same fate as the screamer, or at least horrible death; without the aid or respect of nature, according to Ellison, humanity could face abhorred results.

“The Deathbird” takes a less obvious approach with dog imagery, although there are still connections between man's best friend and nature in the short story, and it even brings in snake imagery similar to “Basilisk” as well. In the strangely organized story about Nathan Stack climbing a mountain to end the world in the far future, the early portions do not contain obvious dog symbolism or imagery. Instead, the piece uses snake imagery predominately: Dira, Stack's guide, is described as a “serpentine shadow” with “A triangular face with a single eye.” Furthermore, Stack and Dira both bend forward and “crawl toward the mountain,” with Dira sliding on its belly (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 352-354). In other sections, a biblical passage included tells of the snake that tempted Adam and Eve to eat fruit from the Garden of Eden's

forbidden tree, with the serpent acting more as a guide or mentor nudging humans toward more agency and independence (for, as the passage tells, “the serpent was more subtil than any beast in the field,” and it assured Eve that “Ye shall not surely die” if she ate from the tree) (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 353). The early passages even question if the serpent was as powerful as God himself, and one passage even exalts Dira as the “Great Coiled One – whose rings were loops of wisdom acquired through centuries of gentleness and perception and immersed meditations,” showing the serpent’s importance in this story and its hand in humankind’s history as a companion (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 358).

However, dogs and snakes become intertwined later on in the story once certain excerpts enter the story. First of all, the Deathbird is given to Dira, for “a special caretakership” was woven between the two (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 358). This relationship could be interpreted as one between master and guard dog, with both of them hovering and staying near Stack as he ascends the mountain. As the Deathbird circles and patrols the planet throughout the story as well, one can glimpse vulture- or dog-like behaviors. Already, though, Ellison shows the importance of allowing nature to be one’s guide. Without Dira’s help, Stack would never have climbed the mountain and achieved his destiny, thereby allowing the Earth to die at the wingbeats of the Deathbird and possibly begin anew, rather than decay indefinitely.

Finally, two passages later on clearly bring dog symbolism to the story. In one passage – a strangely placed essay written by Ellison himself about his late dog Ahbhu – there are clear connections between Stack’s task or even Dira’s duties, and the situation between Ahbhu and his master. In the essay, the writer begins by writing “For eleven years Ahbhu was my closest friend...He was not a pet, he was a person” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 362). He develops a trust with the dog, who would be “right there, lying at their feet” begging for attention and love if the

writer brought someone they could trust, or who would be a “barometer of bums” that would detect an untrustworthy “wrong-o” quickly (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 363). The writer trusts and loves the dog so much that he stoically ends the dog’s life himself when it becomes ill. All of this becomes important to Stack and Dira’s situation – as well as Ellison’s importance of companionship with nature through agents like animals – with the next passage, which is a random pop quiz that asks “Is there significance to the reversal of the word *god* being *dog*” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 364)? With him drawing attention to this strange connection, Ellison makes a connection between dogs and gods, and thereby makes dogs godly agents of nature once again. With dogs established as agents of the gods of nature, he is able to, like in *Vic and Blood*, stress the positive impact nature can have on people in confronting or avoiding ecological horror. Much like the writer and Ahbhu, Stack is forced to decide to mercifully and cleanly kill the planet and its environment to stop it from decaying and suffering. However, with Dira by his side – itself a snake but also like a canine companion who guides and pushes him to climb – Stack is able to develop enough of a bond with Dira and even the planet itself to not only listen to Dira, but to also go through with the mercy-killing of it. The alternative to listening to his companions can be seen all around him, in eerie and unsettling detail: the onyx spire of the mountain “rose out of hell and struggled toward the shredded sky;” poison winds blow through the powdery wastelands of the far-future Earth, and the planet is described as a “carcass” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 356). The destruction came from men as well, according to Dira, who “looked at Stack for a long moment” – almost accusingly – “and then...raised its hand, held it up before Stack’s eyes and slowly, making claws of the fingers, closed...into a fist, into a painfully tight ball that said more eloquently than words: destruction” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 356). Without Stack’s trust in Dira or even the Deathbird to bring about a clean end (and, potentially, a new start, for

the story only notes that it was only the final moments for the race of Men), the ecological horror that was the carcass of the planet would continue without end. Also, with trust in nature – with trust in the guiding serpent – before anything, according to Ellison, maybe the planet would not be a carcass in the first place.

The dog-like nature in both *Vic and Blood* and “The Deathbird” offers some solace to humanity from the ecological horrors wrought by humankind, by offering an opportunity for close relationships with the agents and forces of nature. Trusting animals could mean survival and distrusting them could lead to a continuation of the war and destruction on the environment. The alternative – the unapologetically anti-nature impulses of selfish, imperial human – leads to horrific consequences, as evidenced in “Basilisk.” The differences in nature through animals – from merciless to merciful – are almost a form of estrangement when compared side-by-side. Darko Suvin claims science fiction can show “the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to cognitive glance” (Suvin 124). By presenting familiar ideas – like nature and human beings living in it – while also presenting concepts alien to most readers – such as horrifying monsters and gods tormenting humans directly – the reader, according to Suvin, would be able to develop a more critical eye toward their lives, and posit any possible connections between the familiar and the alien more than they otherwise would. Through estrangement with his worlds of *Vic and Blood* and “The Deathbird” – largely fantastical and unrealistic – Ellison brings further attention to the alternatives offered to humanity in comparison to the more grounded “Basilisk”. The presence of the fantastical ushers readers to think about possible connections and possibilities in the future: while the readers won’t assume that nature would take the form of a god or guide directly, they may make assumptions on how nature could, in a somewhat similar fashion, behave in the future. In the

more fantastical short stories, with hopeless landscapes of wastelands but sympathetic natural guides, Ellison brings more attention to nature and its positivity on humankind and its survival. Then, contrasting those stories sits “Basilisk,” where a realistic setting with an all-too realistic character – a Vietnam War veteran who truly did witness and experience the horrors of war that impacted human, animals, and plants. Ellison does this to urge the readers to find familiarity within his story through its realistic elements, to relate to it in some way, and yet to do so without literal interpretation or clear answers. Ellison expects readers to relate to his story at certain level, but to also feel dissociated from it enough to think beyond the story and into themselves and their own anxiety-driven interpretations. If solutions or brevity were to be offered in “Basilisk,” a largely realistic story with some sf and fantasy elements, then readers would not be forced to face America’s ecological travesties, nor would any solution be satisfactory. A pitch-perfect, optimistic solution would be presented when Ellison’s goals with his ecological horrors are to warn readers and guide them to action because of the lack of real solution at the time. The ecological horrors – and the ecological benefactors – in these short stories are purposefully set in their respective settings. The dog of war, the basilisk, brings attention to the environmental tragedies as a result of wars such as the Vietnam War, and this agent of nature serves as a sharp reminder to readers even today. The basilisk crawls and stalks throughout a realistic setting to bring this purpose to the forefront. The dogs of kindness and guidance – Blood in *Vic and Blood* and Dira in “The Deathbird” – contrast the actions and behavior of the basilisk (and of Ellison’s other gods) heavily, offering a bit of levity. In such hopelessly bleak worlds, glimmers of hope come from these agents of nature, allowing characters like Vic and Stack to truly survive and make an impactful (beneficial) difference to the ecology. This surprising contrast between two forces from a normally sardonic Ellison allows

readers to not only see the potential ecological horrors of the future but also a reminder that, if they listen and tune themselves to nature and build a bond with it, they can make a difference. This glimmer of hope remains with these dog-centric stories, while in some of Ellison's nonanimal stories, the ecological horrors become bleaker and less forgiving.

### CHAPTER THREE: CORPSE-GODS, POLLUTION, AND NATURE'S WRATH

Right at the beginning of Ellison's foreword in *Deathbird Stories*, when describing the "newer, more relevant" gods that mankind begins to adopt and revere, he makes mention of the "God of Smog and the Machine God" (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* xvi). Throughout his collection of short stories and beyond, the forces of nature are not simply personified by animal-like representations like the Basilisk, the Deathbird, or even any simple animal like the narrator's dog in "The Deathbird" or Blood in *Vic and Blood*. In many of the stories, the remnants of the besmirched or harmed Earth serve as the godly messengers to impart some retribution onto humanity. The ecological horror of Ellison's pantheon in *Deathbird Stories* perpetuate ecogothic traditions even when the "ecology" of the stories is seemingly nonsentient or even nonliving and industrial. Oftentimes the Earth itself – the land, plant life, the atmosphere, or even the inventions from man assembled by the resources assembled from nature – can be significant and serve as haunting gothic ghosts that tug at the consciences of humans (and therefore the readers). Again, much like the animalistic and or dog-like gods, these lords serve as a way for Ellison to both estrange the readers from their uneventful realities with such drastic consequences, which then also offers the chance for a critical reflection upon mankind's imperialistic, destructive tendencies toward nature and eventually itself, for humanity is itself a part of nature.

Many of these gods in Ellison's stories in *Deathbird Stories* are, in fact, not as present or overt as those of the Basilisk (and its War God master) or the Deathbird. These gods of the nonanimal environment, from the pollution god that assumes the form of gargoyles to the golem-like Rock God, represent a less vocal portion of the planet and are, as like Robert Nixon describes in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, victims of "slow

violence.” Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). With this definition of slow violence and the overlooked parts of violated nature in mind, many of the stories that feature such godly ecological horror feature them as gods of *decaying* or *dying* nature, yet a nature still agentic and potent enough to retaliate against mankind.

The portrayal of many gods in Ellison’s pantheon as wrathful corpses or near-corpse – pulled apart, dying, or born from death itself to suggest some undead quality – provides an environmentalist call of attention to the state of the environment, and how humankind normally perceives the nonanimal environment. In this specific case, the natural world is portrayed as a “casualty” of humankind’s toiling, even outside of war (something that stories like “Basilisk” and “The Deathbird” or even *Vic and Blood* note). Nixon notes in *Slow Violence* that wartime human casualties earn our sympathy while voiceless casualties from war (or, one could argue, those outside of war, and killed through gradual environmental “slow violence”) fade into more obscurity. He writes:

What is a war casualty? The answer appears painfully obvious. It asserts itself less through argument than through visceral photographs: a torso shredded by a roadside bomb; a bloodied peasant spread-eagled in a ditch; a soldier, cigarette dangling nonchalantly, crashing his boot into a dead woman’s head. Yet such images account only for immediate, visually arresting fatalities. What about those casualties that don’t fit the photographic stereotypes, casualties that occur long after major combat has been concluded, casualties whose belatedness and dispersal make them resistant to dramatic packaging (Nixon 200).

Already, Ellison could be seen – in a fairly face-slapping manner – showing the reader that some of these natural gods in his time, and even present day, could only be born from nature ravaged by violence. More specifically, these gods were born from gradual violence, and Ellison’s short story collection, therefore, taps into domestic environmental concerns on the rise in the 1960s and 1970s – concerns that culminated in such legislation as the Federal Water Pollution Control Act and Clean Water Act of 1972 to help promote water quality regulation in a time of consciousness over water and air pollution. Clearly, worry abounded in the New Wave era over America’s environment, which experienced everything from poisoning of the air to a flaming Ohio river due to prevalent pollution. In Ellison’s speculative pantheon of more modern and relevant gods, if there were gods of nature and the Earth, they would certainly either be husks, or embodiments of dying earth itself. However, much like the animalistic gods in “Basilisk” and “The Deathbird,” some of Ellison’s other stories do not simply show decrepit gods wasting away. Despite their worn stature, the gods behind his pantheon crackle and pulse with power and with enough agency to wreak havoc on the humans directly or indirectly responsible for the ravaged planet.

As gestured toward above, when it comes to the state of many of Ellison’s nonanimal gods, one noteworthy feature is their “corpse-like” nature, despite their otherwise non-living nature. In “Corpse” – with the main title already showing that something such as the god featured may be the “corpse” – the abandoned, derelict, or stripped cars that eventually impact the main character, Thom, in a spiritual way “reminded him of graverobbers defiling corpses” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 251). In fact, Thom (and the narrator) not only views the skeletal remains of cars as otherworldly, but also as the remains of a religion or godliness. In the story, the narrator (and by extension Thom, due to his thoughts of “senseless commitment” or

reverence toward stripped cars) describes in detail how “Abandoned automobiles brought to a wrecking yard” are made into “cubes of squared automobiles” that sit in reclamation yards for resale, silently as “They are not expected to speak” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 255). The narrator also in the same vein describes how South American natives in the 1500s buried their tributes of “Gold ingots and gorgeous objects of precious metal” once the conquering Spaniards began slaughtering and behaving less like the benevolent “white gods” the natives first thought they were (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 255). The narrator and main character connect gold and precious metal – religious totems for many cultures – to the metal made for automobiles, clearly indicating the cars featured in the story serve as totems as well. However, the cars serve as both corpses of industry and broken technological products, and as corpses of actual broken and squandered metal from the earth. There is clearly a god present in “Corpse,” for Thom even suspects this presence to a degree by thinking to himself before his impossible fusion into a stone pillar: “If sentience suddenly sparks, and if they [cars] do, indeed, have a group mind, then they must have a society...A culture. A species. A mass belief. With gods and legends and secret dreams they dream while their motors idle” (qtd in Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 256). This god, however, is a “downtrending god” who “does not like his graves robbed, the corpses of his supplicants defiled” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 256). Death and decay permeates and clings heavily around this god.

As an early representation of the dying nonanimal force of nature, this “downtrending” metal god in “Corpse” overtly represents some of the key tenets of Nixon’s theories on slow violence. As the corpses of the metal god – the shells of the cars that litter the streets and scrapyards in the story – stand abandoned, “not expected to speak,” they remain silent to the squandering of Earth’s resources and to the physical pollution of their environments that their

abandonment represents. Of course, this silence from the husks of cars parallels the silence that nature has, according to Nixon. However, these stoic gravestone-like car corpses also represent something Nixon calls “resource curse.” Nixon describes this concept as something that answers the question “what forces turn belongings—those goods, in a material and an ethical sense—into evil powers that alienate people from the very elements that have sustained them, environmentally and culturally, as all that seemed solid melts into liquid tailings, oil spills, and plumes of toxic air” (Nixon 69)? In other words, resource curses were pieces of nature corrupted into non-natural, toxic elements. Automobiles in Ellison’s story become artifacts of “resource curse,” as automobiles are both products of nature as well as products of humankind – and thus responsible for the damage on nature. During the environmentalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the iconic automobile especially took a lot of heat. According to 1988’s *Air Pollution, The Automobile, and Public Health*, the major car companies “permitted themselves” to be the environment’s villains and were hit hard by carbon emission regulations that stemmed from the Clean Air Act of 1970 (Kennedy and Grumbly 4). Automobiles became the very embodiment of pollution. Yet, as Thom describes in the story:

The automobile is the largest single minority in the country today... Yet we use them as beasts of burden, we drive them into one another, wounding them, we abandon them by roadsides, unburied, unloved, we sell and trade them like Roman slave masters, we give them thought only insofar as they reflect our status (qtd in Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 253).

With Thom anthropomorphizing the automobile and making it into an animal that humankind exploited, Ellison manages to turn the “downtrending” automobile god into a god of the earth as well. The “supplicant” cars are victims of resource curse, for they were sacred and natural ores

turned into destructive polluting beasts for humans. Even inventions from humans are given life from nature and become part of Ellison's pantheon. Therefore, once the god decides to act upon Thom, it does so as a god of nature – as a god of the besmirched and exploited metal turned into weapons against nature, and as a god of the dying earth that consists of those very metals. Ellison wishes to show readers that the ecological impacts of humankind's actions (and the ensuing ecological horror) can be found even in the industrial centers, even in the broken-down bodies of cars.

Of course, Ellison does not present a pitiful earth god groveling before humankind. While Nixon depicts nature as a silent victim of a slow-burning war against it, Ellison manages to turn the silent victim into a powerful force that creates some sort of punishment onto those around it. Ellison, in turn, turns the dying silent victims into quiet yet vengeful ecological horror. The god of "Corpse," although in a unique and strange way, punishes Thom as an example for humankind. At the end of the story, as Thom walks down Fifth Avenue after work, he encounters a group of children beating deserted cars' windows with hammers. Yet, despite their desecration of the bodies, the children remain untouched or unpunished by the god above, and instead Thom faces the wrath of this god and becomes fused and entombed inside an adjacent stone pillar when he tries to save a small plastic Virgin Mary figurine in one of the cars. Ellison's downtrending metal god may seem strange considering both its target and mode of punishment, but Ellison's portrayal turns it into an ecological horror of sorts. As established before, the cars serve as totems to the god in the story. That is, they serve as both symbols of nature and pollution, already directly forcing Thom (and readers) to face the depressing state of the environment due to humanity. But the god's direct action towards Thom, a self-described "religious man," gives the god a target of potential revenge toward those that impacted the earth and serves as Ellison's

direct jab towards those responsible. For one, Thom – an adult – faces punishment while children do not. An adult facing punishment while children avoid it, of course, relates to the idea that adults and parents are those responsible for the world’s ecological health, rather than the impressionable children. In fact, as highlighted in a 2017 study in environmental psychology titled “The Role of Parents and Best Friends in Children's Pro-Environmentalism: Differences According to Age and Gender,” children were found to be heavily dependent on their parents’ attitude and behavior toward the environment; positive experiences from their upbringing led to positive environmentalist behavior in children, and negative experiences resulted in the opposite (Collado, Evans, and Sorrel). Children were also found to be more ecologically minded – oftentimes due to positive experiences with nature – according to a 2013 study, “Children’s Restorative Experiences and Self-Reported Environmental Behaviors” (Collado and Corraliza).

Ellison’s drawing of attention to the adult-child accountability shows how he holds his adults to more accountability in “Corpse,” for while the story’s god does not like his cars robbed or disrespected, “the children *believe*, you see; and I [Thom] did not” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 256). The children might be breaking down the cars, but breaking them down into parts brings them closer to their original natural forms, and the cars cease to be sad corpses. In a way, Ellison shows that the vandals “ruthlessly stripping” cars and breaking them apart are, in fact, innocent bystanders and even agents of the nature gods (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 249). In contrast, Thom does not believe in these gods, which leads to his punishment. As stated before, Thom initially sees cars as beasts of burden for humankind, feeling pity for their abandonment but ultimately accepting their fate. Also, he chooses to try and save the Virgin Mary figurine from destruction instead of the car: he claims that, when he saw the figurine in a Chevrolet that the group of kids were bashing, “For the first time in my life, I felt I must perform an act of senseless

commitment...I wanted to save the figure from the depredations of the graverobbers” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 256). For the first time in his life he felt selfless, and instead of protecting the world from becoming a car graveyard and pledging some loyalty to the earth, he instead chooses to protect another god’s idol. Because of his transgression of sorts, Thom suffers the ironic punishment of being fused into the stone pillar to oversee the destruction of cars. He becomes a rigid figure, just like the Virgin Mary he tried to save, and is faced with seeing the children break down what his generation and those before manufactured. The downtrending god of “Corpse,” by the end of the story, becomes an ecological horror to Thom, and therefore all other adults who may be reading his story. Their own dying creations will potentially turn on them, and enlist the children in later generations to degrade themselves in order to solve the problems set by adults.

Another tale in *Deathbird Stories*, “Neon,” also turns something normally considered artificial and shows how it represents a part of dying nature. In the story, neon tube lights communicate with the main character Roger Charna. However, the voice is only able to converse with Charna due to an accident he was involved in, an accident that necessitated a surgery where “They cryonically removed the pain areas in his anterior hypothalamic nucleus, and froze parts of him to be worked on later,” and which gave him his cybernetic implants – including a replacement eye that replaced his broken one (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 111). In a way, Roger himself must become a corpse before the lights – with lights even somewhat “corpse-like” as the last lingering vestiges left from reacting neon or reflection – reach him, talk with him (an “OBSTINATE HUMAN BEING” in the talking light’s opinion), and finally grant him otherworldly sensations (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 117). The fact that Roger must be a living corpse of sorts to communicate with the neon makes it clear that Roger is speaking to a force beyond the physical realm; the fact that this voice emanates from “Every neon sign and

fluorescent painting” – artifacts of “resource curse” where natural gas like neon has been repurposed for a human tool that pollutes and overwhelms the air with artificial light – shows that neon could be seen like the automobile god in “Corpse.” The neon lights embody the corpses of metal and natural resources that were formed into industrial signs, and thus it is a dying god of nature. Later on in the story, when Charna gives into the voice, embraces a neon sign, and electrocutes himself, beyond-spectrum sights of “between silver and orange” colors that bleed into infrared and ultraviolet are seen. Even smells of “silver pines just after the rain...chamomile, juniper, Melissa and mountain gentian,” sounds of a “Louisville Slugger connecting solidly with a hardball,” feelings of an infant’s smooth skin, and the taste of lithograph ink, permeate into his very being (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 119). Because some of these smells resemble plant life, and because of these unexplainable colors, Ellison further confirms that in the industrial cities, even the lights can serve as nonanimal corpse-gods of nature.

Much like the god in “Corpse,” the god in “Neon” still conveys a feeling of ecological horror to its victim, and instills a unique yet fitting and horrible punishment to him and, eventually, others. Charna is the first victim in this story and is promptly electrocuted after trying to embrace a neon sign romantically. His entire physical body is vaporized, and only his cybernetic chest, eye, and finger are left at the foot of a neon sign. On one hand, the reader can see his fate as gruesome. Before hearing the neon voice and losing his physical body, Charna “tried to reestablish the life-pattern he’d known before the accident, but it was useless,” and he lost everything resembling stability and success in his life after the surgery that kept him alive with robotic parts (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 111). With these very robot parts as the only remnants left of him after his annihilation, Ellison could be portraying the neon god as a wrathful

force punishing Charna for living beyond his time by such unnatural means. While he lived longer for a short amount of time, his real human body fried at the hands of a dying light god because of the very parts that kept him alive. Ellison could be showing the reader the inevitability behind nature's wrath on humankind no matter how many inventions they make, showing how even natural forces that humankind normally controls such as electricity and light can suddenly bite back.

However, the punishment also serves to represent Nixon's *Slow Violence* concepts. In "Neon," the otherwise silent neon is given a voice to speak and coerce the man to come to it, claiming that it loves him. Already, Ellison warns of how an injured nature can appear to be supportive and loving, but given the chance and voice, will wreak its revenge. Also, the neon light god possibly does not simply vaporize Charna's body, but takes the biological chunks – the natural chunks – and leaves the artificial parts behind. In this sense, the light that is given agency takes back what was rightfully nature's – the human body – and converts it into natural neon as punishment. The fact that "the angels were the exact color of charna" – or what is earlier described as "the exact color of caring" – further supports this idea as well (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 119-120). However, the angels, who descended onto the planet after Charna's death and "changed everything," fit into this punishment to show Ellison's nature and its forceful doling out of judgment to humankind (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 120). The angels are more direct agents than the unseen god in "Corpse," and might even be seen as a benevolent force, for "everyone enjoyed it a lot" once these religious figures descended onto Earth (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 120). However, they still serve as ecological horrors, for they "were the exact color of charna" – the color of the vaporized Charna – and thus likely did the same to others as the neon voice did to Charna (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 120). The angels do say that "Well, now that

they're ready we can go and show them how to do it," indicating that Charna's death sparked the onset of a chain reaction of the nature gods' actions on humans (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 120). Then, in a sense, humankind in this story is robbed of its humanity and life like Charna, and while it may be a painless death, it still takes them away from the planet. In the end, like "Corpse," the god and angels in "Neon" go from repurposed natural resources to ecological horror toward humankind, and take an even more direct approach to warn humans of nature's power.

While "Corpse" and "Neon" feature pieces of the natural world warped into man-made objects before any natural gods arrive and exact revenge, *Deathbird Stories* features much more straightforward stories of vengeful nature gods born from the decaying environment. One such story, "Bleeding Stones," is one of the more direct examples that uses a godly ecological horror to show humans in Ellison's world – and readers – the repercussions of environmental damage. In the story, an army of gargoyles butchers the men, women, and children of New York in graphic, unapologetic fashion. Nail-like claws gouge out eyes, slit throats, rip apart bodies, and throw hapless people into walls as "pulped flesh and viscera" practically cake the city streets and walls (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 207).

These beasts inherit the earth by bathing it in the blood of its previous inhabitants, yet they are still agents of nature. For one thing, the stone gargoyles that slaughter the Jesus People are born from the "Alchemical magical nuisance" that is the smog of industry, and their bodies rise from the "apotheosis of the Industrial Revolution" – the pollution suffocating the stone St. Patrick's Cathedral – after a rain of blood falls from the clouds of "alchemical magic" and moistens their once-stone skin (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 205-206). The gargoyles, a godly race, are made from the remnants of pilfered earth that was made into a church, and they rise from the

death of atmosphere, for the race that will “Come to life after a hundred years is the race that will inherit the Earth; hardly meek, the race made to breathe this new air” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 207). They are natural stone turned into beasts of vengeance by the pollution, and their punishment is both swift and simple. “Bleeding Stones” is one of Ellison’s more direct stories when it comes to impacting readers with ecological horror. The gargoyles are certainly corpse-like, for they are born from both repurposed stone – again an example of resource curse from Nixon – and the toxic air pollution of “Unburned hydrocarbons. Oxides of nitrogen...Unsaturated hydrocarbons, ozone, nitrogen dioxide...Carbon monoxide” and many more poisonous chemicals created by humankind (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 204). The beasts are from dead earth, and breath dead air. Yet, despite this, “they dive into the crowd and begin the ritual slaughter” with reckless abandon (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 207). These beasts unapologetically redirect to humankind the catastrophic and almost war-like damage that environmental destruction did up to that point. The chemicals listed in the story are mostly associated with fossil fuel or industrial pollution. However, given the gargoyles’ graphic and war-like punishment onto the hapless people before them, the beasts could also be Ellison’s representation of consequence for reckless chemical use in general. During the Vietnam War, herbicides such as Agent Orange, White, and Blue were chemical acids that stained the skies and fell onto the Vietnamese wildlife for “defoliation to deny tree cover and crop destruction to deny food;” these air pollutants, therefore, resulted in more wartime casualties (Brauer 50). These blunt ecological horrors – themselves gargoyle servants of some god of pollution and dying nature – clearly bring out karmic justice by killing people just as the pollution and chemicals did, and in a way that parallels the warfare that ensued from some of that pollution.

However, while the gargoyles' slaughter of people seems to be a simple message from Ellison, the fact that the victims happen to be people around a cathedral truly highlights how these gargoyles serve as representations of the nature gods, and how blind ignorance toward the silent victims of nature can incur their wrath in due time. Like how Thom was punished for worshipping the wrong god at the time in "Corpse," the people in "Bleeding Stones" fall victim to the gargoyles almost because of their fatefully close proximity to the St. Patrick's Cathedral, and their faith in the wrong god. The story even points this misplaced religiosity out as it sardonically describes the "Jesus People" in a mocking and pitiful tone, with the narrator saying "They are recognized. The Jesus People...here, at last, at this greatest repository of the faith in the land of ultraviolet radiation, they have come to spread their potency at the altar of organized power" (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 206). The narrator almost describes the Jesus People – the innocent humans – as naïve patrons, or even almost like a dish about to be served to the godly forces bubbling above them in the stones and in the polluted air. Once again, the ecological horror opens its maw threateningly, and in a purposeful way.

In the story "Rock God," much like the gargoyles in "Bleeding Stones," Ellison again takes a more direct approach of writing an ecological horror. In the story, the rock god Dis erupts and punishes humankind after a human disrespects his body – found from "the very ground they walked" and separated into various precious power stones – by building a one-hundred and fifty-story skyscraper over Dis' black soul mote piece (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 194). As one of the most overt pieces in *Deathbird Stories*, the very earth is shown to be dead and scattered about selfishly, with the precious stones that make up Dis distributed amongst civilizations of humanity. Much like those before him, Dis' essence is besmirched by mankind's imperial actions (in this case, through construction over his most sacred body part, at the hands of "a

Croatian workman who had no idea what it was, and threw it, with a spadeful of refuse, into the hollow center of the cornerstone of a great skyscraper”) (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 196). Also, like the gargoyles in “Bleeding Stones,” he directly harms those who awake him and disrespect his soul and body, with him absorbing both humans and buildings and streets into his body, for “All this was rock. All this was flesh of his flesh. All this belonged to Dis, to be absorbed...” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 201). Much like them, his presence is clear for his victims and readers: reckless treatment of even the earth and rock can lead to calamity.

However, Ellison makes Dis and “Rock God” unique in one way: his voice. Contradicting Nixon’s *Slow Violence*, Dis – as a god and representative of the ground and earth – actually instructs people on how to respect his power and body. In the story, Dis spoke with ancient men, and said: “I will sleep...I will sleep and dream. I will be safe. I will give you a thing. Possess it. The holiest of holies. I sleep within...Keep safe my soul. I will come again one day. Unending pain if my soul is lost” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 193). As he speaks, the men can hear “The sound of volcanoes. The sound of winds. Caverns. Pain. Vapor exploding through stone,” showing the might and ancientness of Dis (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 193). Nature clearly speaks to humans in a threatening way that would never happen outside of fiction, yet his stone is still used without any care or reverence. Ellison writes his rock god in such a direct way to highlight just how voiceless and overlooked the nonanimal world truly is. He also writes in this direct manner to show just how merciless the ecological horrors of nature can be. Simply disrespecting the ground and earth can bring about destruction, and Ellison does not wish to allow his readers to only think of chemical warfare and pollution as the only potential damages inflicted by humankind.

Even the Deathbird in “Deathbird” could be seen as not just a harbinger of death, or just as a force of the animality in nature, but also being almost born and present as a bird of death. In the story, it “crouched over the dead cinder” of the Earth and “raised its head to the star-filled sky and repeated the sigh of loss the Earth had felt at the end of the short story” (Ellison, *Deathbird Stories* 379). The Deathbird parallels the phoenix bird, and even as a stand-in for Christian beliefs of holy resurrection, where death must precede any sort of life or afterlife. As humankind destroys the earth, it is born, and engulfs the earth during its final breath. The Deathbird, in a way, is Ellison’s last warning to readers: extended damage to the environment will not only kill many humans, but it will also bring about the death of the entire planet itself.

Therefore, Ellison’s motivations for embodying the nonanimal environment and its pollutants as deathly gods carries a clear environmentalist message: humans have harmed the world through industry, war, or even just by overpopulation, and have rendered the environment sickly. By personifying the environment as deathly corpse-gods, Ellison prevents what authors like Carson and Nixon warn about when it comes to human portrayals of nature: the facelessness or the silence of an otherwise hard-to-empathize part of the world that can still eventually decimate everything. Even with the near-elimination of nature in many of these stories, in their oppressively neon-stained, building-covered, automobile-inhabited landscapes, nature does not cease to exist. Nature manifests into something that confronts humankind – sometimes directly, as is the case in “Neon” with talking lights, and sometimes especially destructively, as is the case in “Rock God” and “Bleeding Stones” and their slaughter of those entrenched in their industrial lives – and prevents ignorance of the situation. In Ellison’s stories, there are no silent victims in nature, and their corpse-like appearance – much like the mutilated or burned or ravaged bodies caught in America’s wars – reminds readers of the damage caused through human activity.

Much of this characterization of the gods as ecological horrors plays into a movement of “world-dissolution” that Latham notes happened during the New Wave era of sf. By creating both a familiar and yet entirely alien world due to the actions of his terrifyingly powerful adjudicating gods, Ellison manages to play with this pantheon of corpse-gods in a way that displaces, discomforts, and forces the readers to face the state of the environment from human action. This methodology, first of all, comes from a time in the sf canon of rebellion, changing expectations and traditions, and radical self-reflection, and thus makes sense as a means by Ellison to make readers think harder about themselves. Preceding the New Wave, some of the more noteworthy pieces in the sf canon saw the environment – especially new, untapped lands – as colonial opportunities for “consensus futures” that promoted the greater good of mankind, according to Christopher Pak’s *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Sf* (Pak 98). While concern over the environment preceded the 1960s and the rise of the more official environmentalist movement – with authors such as Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, or Arthur C. Clarke holding the debate over the morality behind terraforming (or transforming a planet and its atmosphere and potentially its structure to be livable or resemble Earth) an uninhabited or somewhat populated planet – many of these efforts were considered “‘misanthropic critiques of human nature’ or ‘sentimental illusions based on out-of-date ecology,’” with some stories still promoting the concept of terraforming planets (Pak 18-20). With these outdated sentiments, colonial sentiments on Earth were somewhat promoted by the fantastical stories about ships colonizing across the stars, as alien natives are treated somewhat humanely but also as “parodic, grotesque imitations of [imperial] humans” and the environment doing nothing to curb the invasion narrative common in pulp sf preceding World War II (Latham 488). However, Ellison’s stories and their portrayal of nature’s corpse-gods fits into the

reactionary environmentalist movement within the New Wave of sf, where an “overtly anti-hegemonic strain of eco-disaster stories” thrived as the New Wave “adopted an anti-technocratic bent that put it at odds with the technophilic optimism of the larger social processes to which they had been conjoined in the service of state and corporate power” (Latham 490). Gone were the “Golden Age” days of sf with technological optimism and Manifest Destiny living in full force on and beyond Earth, and they were replaced by a new overt pessimism toward humankind’s actions.

Ellison creates his army of nature gods – representing everything from cars and pollution to light and even the very earth humans walk on – in his quest to estrange, horrify, and eventually (and hopefully) educate his readers outside of pointlessly optimistic and colonialist mindsets. These mindsets, commonly established before the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, could be detrimental to the future of the world, according to Ellison, and as he follows New Wave goals of rebellion, he sets out to disrupt the status-quo and bring about ecological awareness and warning. The short stories “Corpse,” “Neon,” “Bleeding Stones,” “Rock God,” deviate slightly from Ellison’s animalistic stories such as “Basilisk” (with “The Deathbird” featuring animal and nonanimal agents of nature as it sets out to terrify and influence its readers). Instead of animal-like representations of nature serving as the ecological horrors, these stories represent the silent, non-animal and often unsympathetic forces of nature. Instead of offering any solace like *Vic and Blood* or “The Deathbird,” these stories follow “Basilisk” and go even further as the nonanimal forces of nature annihilate humankind at all scales – personal or global – for their transgressions. Ellison writes in this way to create a mean pantheon of ecological horrors that not only represent something specific like the Vietnam War, but humankind’s poisoning of the planet overall. He takes what Nixon would consider the silent

victims of this poisoning – the often non-anthropomorphized and forgotten ecology such as the air or earth – and creates godly monsters of them. Like with the basilisk and dogs, Ellison purposefully brings out Gods of Automobiles, Pollution, Light, Rock, and the very Earth itself. He does this to bring a fantastical element – the ecological horror – that could be the very means of disrupting the status-quo in a memorable and impactful way. As Malekin writes, “Fantasy, however, can penetrate deeper than realism. Fantasy is valuable only as expressing or effecting something unattainable by realism... In many of the fantastic stories, two worlds are played off against each other. This occurs often on the level of ideas, as ‘normality’ versus violence...” (Malekin 21-22). All these short stories show nonanimal nature completely breaking normal society or expectations through some fantastical, godly, and altogether terrifying way: the God of the Automobiles entombs a human into a pillar forever, the God of Pollution possesses stone gargoyles and slaughters everyone in sight, the God of Light obliterates a human out of his skin, the Rock God kills humankind for disrespecting rock and earth, and the Deathbird snuffs the dying, poisoned world out of its misery. By overexaggerating nature’s hand in humankind’s destruction, Ellison heavy-handedly brings about a shocking, unapologetic lesson fitting for his character: the uncaring or even karmic forces of nature can – and will – bring about misery and doom if humankind disrespects it. Instead of taking a realistic approach, Ellison’s ecological horrors through his pantheon of gods sends his environmentalist warning with extra punch and sting, potentially impacting his readers more than simple or grounded messages ever could.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Harlan Ellison, much as he did everywhere else, loudly and unabashedly made his name and actions known within the sf community and the New Wave era. In many cases, the man was a delinquent, a rebel-rouser, and a game-changer. One could call Ellison everything – really everything, even rude or reckless or a little arrogant – except obscure and hidden from fellow sf writers and the public. As he contributed to rebellious movements like the Civil Rights Movement or outcast groups like the comic book community and the underdog trading card collectors, he contributed as well to the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s in his writing, specifically with his 1975 collection of short stories that was publishing right in the heart of the time period: *Deathbird Stories*. As he paved – or more accurately unflinchingly smelted – new ground, he also drew to traditions of American literature to accomplish some of his goals with his collection. Withers writes in his article how Ellison as a sf writer was “destined to look backwards, backwards into the medieval past for guidance, insight, and inspiration” by looking toward Dante’s *Inferno* in creating “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,” and Ellison continues this “well-worn literary path” with his *Deathbird Stories* by following the tradition of the ecogothic. In numerous stories throughout the collection, Ellison creates ecogothic “ecological horrors” by representing nature through a pantheon of godly forces and deities. He does this in order to estrange his readers, forcing them to face humankind’s ecological sins in a shocking and unforgiving manner fitting of his personality. Some of these deities represent the animalistic side of nature, such as the basilisk and or the veteran Lestig in “Basilisk” and Dira and the Deathbird in “The Deathbird,” and Ellison uses these agents to surface Americans’ potential anxieties toward the catastrophes incurred into Vietnam during the Vietnam War, a war that still holds weight in American history. He also uses these dog-like agents of nature to follow

his precedent set by the telepathic dog Blood in Ellison's earlier novella *Vic and Blood* to show a potential alternative for humankind – one where humanity manages to survive or make an impact on the world by cooperating with nature. However, other deities serve as powerful corpse-gods, representing the overlooked and gradually poisoned landscapes found in America and everywhere else on Earth. In the stories “Corpse,” “Neon,” “Bleeding Stones,” “Rock God,” and “The Deathbird,” Ellison pulls no punches with his corpse-gods of nonanimalistic nature that show a clear allegory for humans: disrespect toward nature will result in punishment. All these stories serve as more modern versions of the ecogothic – a way to force readers to face past transgressions that past generations or even they themselves caused onto the environment – while also following the New Wave practices of deconstructing old, imperialist, colonial mindsets that promoted the human condition at the expense of the rest of the planet. His writing exhibiting the same unhesitant and unapologetic zeal for change that he has, Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* serves as an entertaining, frightening, and anxious reminder and warning for its readers. It stood as a more modern ecogothic that aimed to scare readers in a less direct, yet more memorable, fashion of the dangers of unrepentant human action on the environment, and it still stands today with that same goal. In a world where people still debates and pulls its hair with insanity toward the building damage to humankind's home, Ellison's pantheon of animal and nonanimal gods can keep people becoming complacent or forgetful of their actions, and – just like Ellison – keep people on the edge of their seat forever seeking change for a better future.

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