

Animal Stuffing

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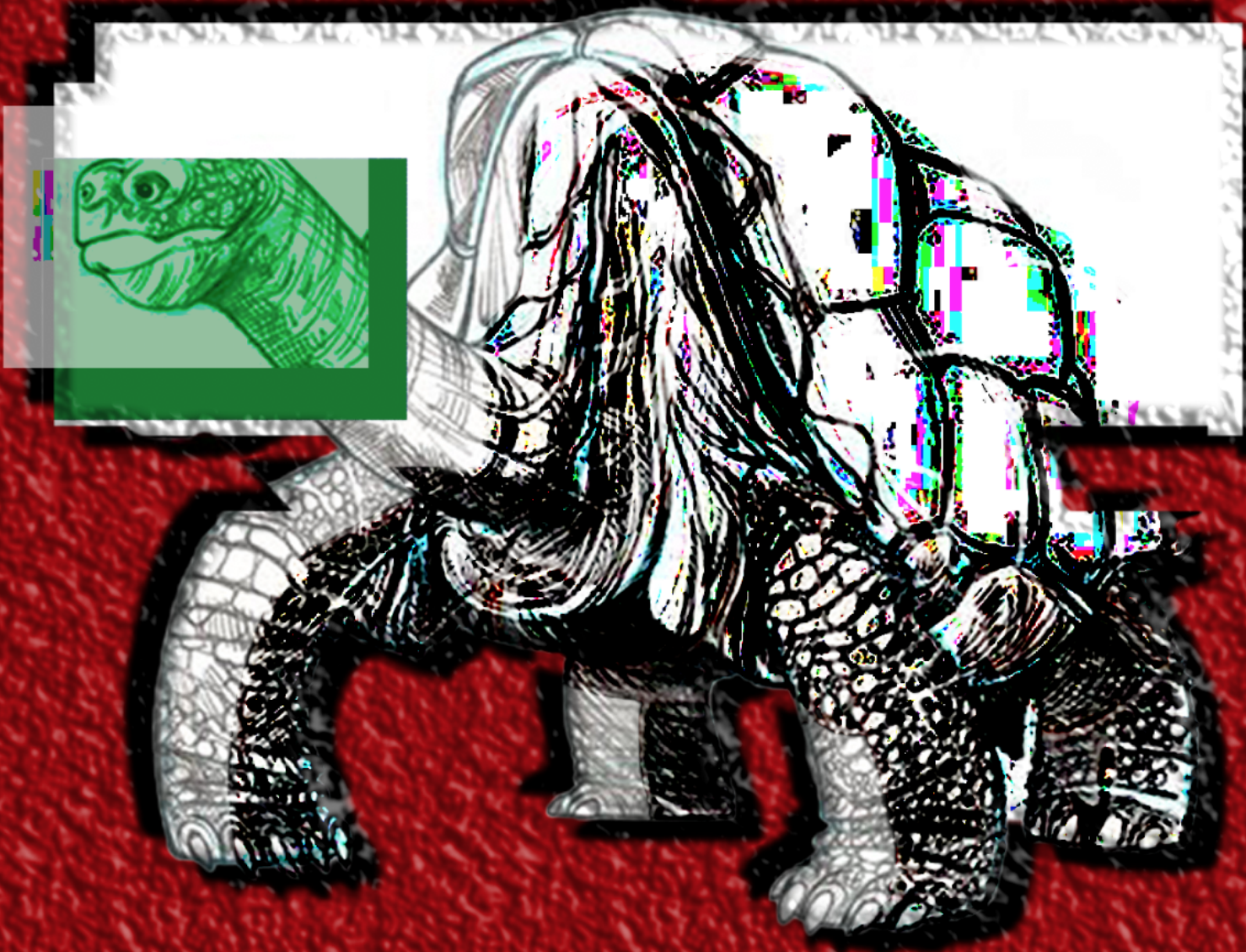
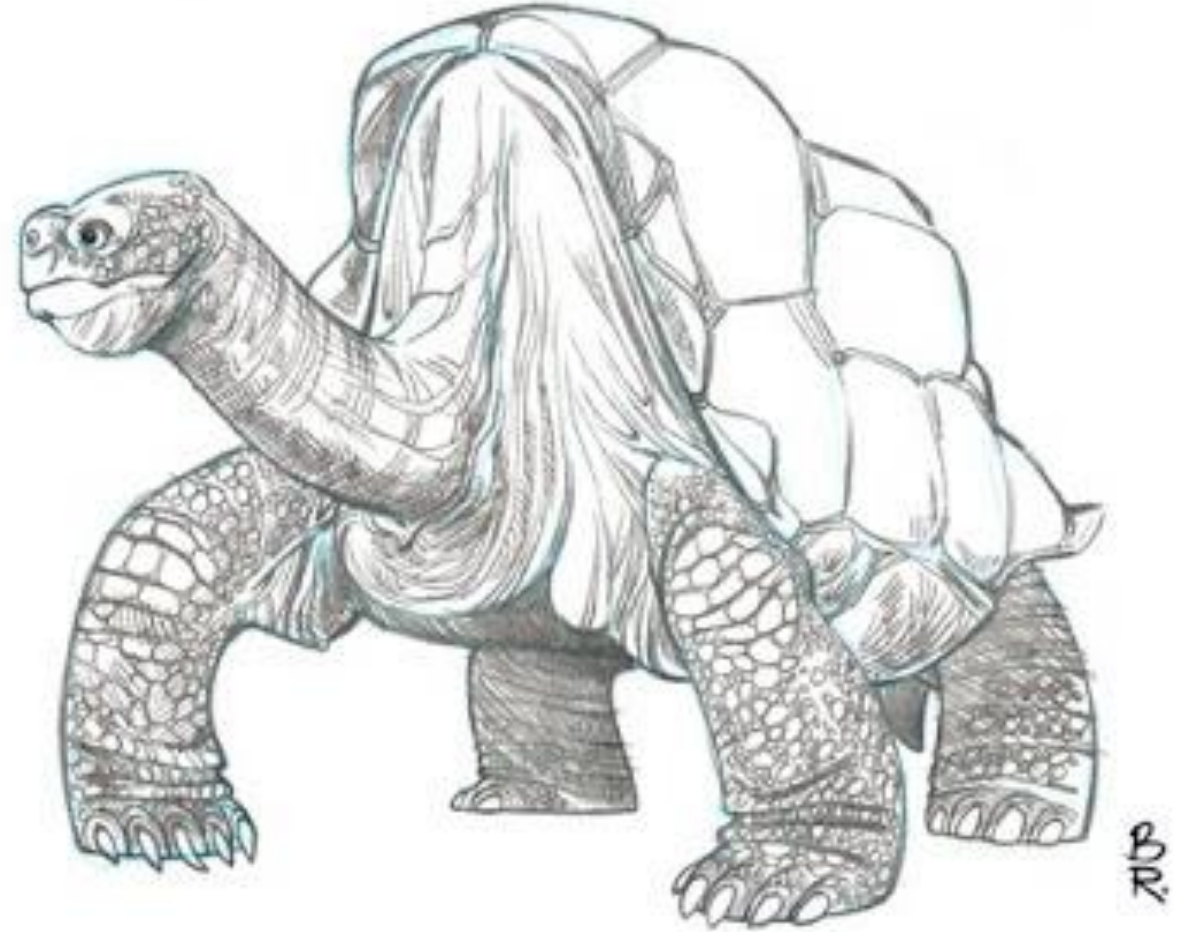
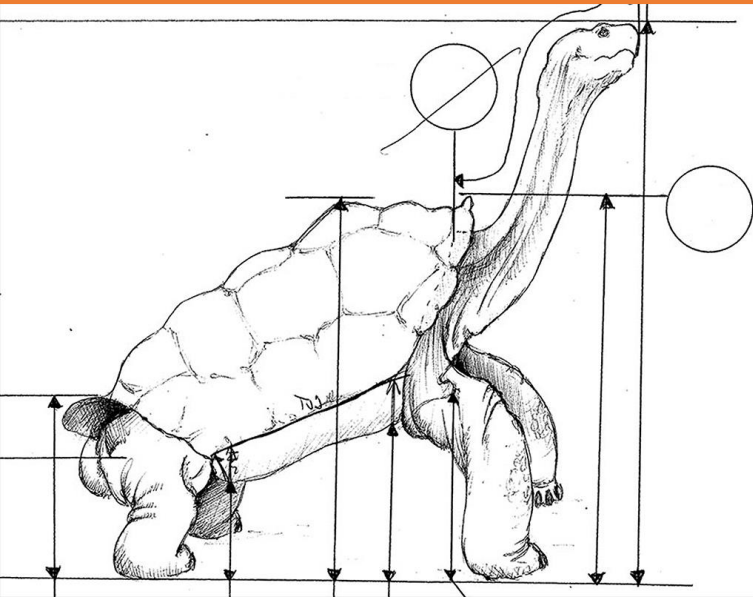
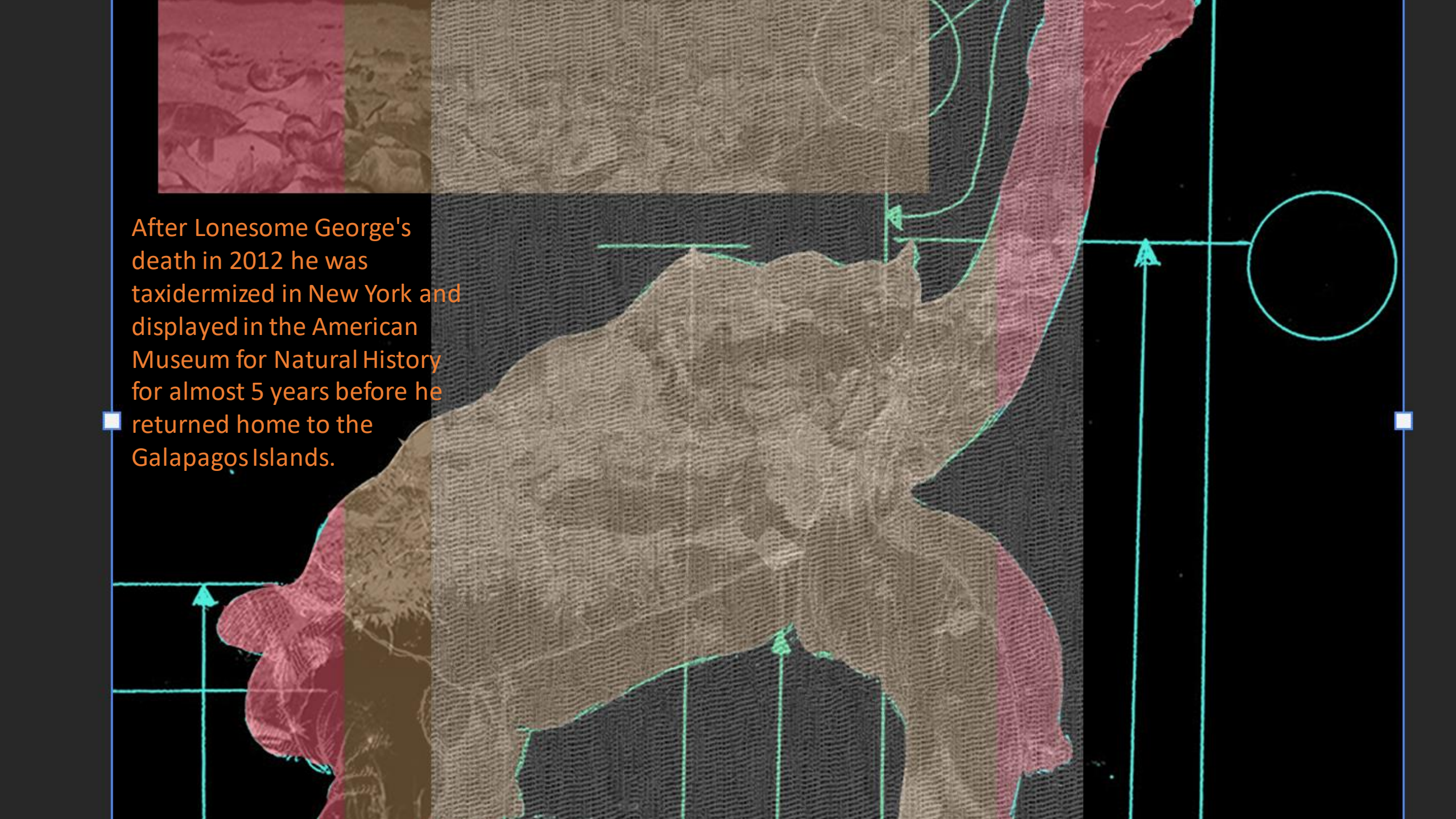


Table Of Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Intro..... | 2 |
| “Shell” a Short Story | 3 |
| Essay On the life and death of Lonesome George..... | 4 |
| Wrap..... | 5 |

Pieces of artwork were taken from the following-
Reynolds, Barry. *Galapagos Tortoise*. 2011.
The American Museum of Natural History.





After Lonesome George's death in 2012 he was taxidermized in New York and displayed in the American Museum for Natural History for almost 5 years before he returned home to the Galapagos Islands.

The Rarest Creature on Earth

When I was younger, I used to run around my house, hooting, hollering, jumping and smashing. My parents tried everything they could to calm me down. Once when I had accidentally knocked over my mother's favorite lamp and smashed it, they sent me to a time out. I had to sit in a corner facing inwards and I could not move. I did this, and as I sat, I peeled all the wallpaper off the walls of the corner. What else was I supposed to do? No more time-outs for me.

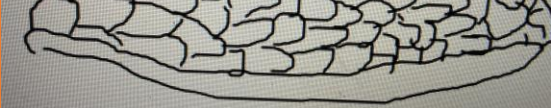
A few days later I scared my mom so bad with one of my hollers that she dropped her dinner plate on the floor. I can still remember the peas rolling out to each end of the linoleum. She grabbed my hand and yanked me up the stairs. I sat down on the toilet while she unwrapped a fresh bar of soap. She put it in my mouth and told me, "Keep this in your mouth until dinner time. That'll teach you." I then proceeded, out of spite for my unfair mother, to eat the entire bar of soap. When presented with my dinner I patted my tummy and informed my mother that I didn't need my dinner, I had already eaten. I smiled as she looked at me with wide-eyed horror. No more soap for me.

My parents next strategy to control me was to enroll me on a soccer team. Every day I would kick the ball around hooting and hollering all I wanted. One day at soccer practice I went to kick the ball when my toe hit something hard. I squealed in pain before looking down to see what I had kicked. Next to my foot was a little turtle. I was afraid that I had hurt him, so I quickly took him and stuffed him in my pocket. Back at home I showed my mother. I asked her if we should bring him to the hospital. She just shook her head. She said that the turtle was fine because of its shell. It was hard and protected the little beast from anything that wanted to hurt it. I asked her if I could get a shell to protect me. She smiled and told me that if I had a shell, I would be the rarest creature in the world. I decided that is what I wanted to be. My mother tried to convince me that I didn't need a shell because she was there to protect me. I didn't listen. I wanted to learn more about turtles, so my mom took me to the library. I sat in the children's section, looking through book after book for a story about turtles and their shells. Every time a book did not have anything to do with turtles, I became annoyed and threw the book out the window. I had done this before at the library and I was banned from coming back for two weeks. Those two weeks had passed and now I was more careful. I only threw the books with hard covers out the window. I figured the hard covers would act like shells and the books would not be hurt. I threw the soft covered books into a pile behind me. Finally, I found my book, *The Tortoise and the Hare*. This book was not about a turtle but instead a tortoise, though at the time I didn't know the difference. In the book a tortoise defeated a hare by going slow and steady. I decided that if I wanted to become the rarest creature on the planet, I would need to go slow and steady. This idea was exhilaratingly reinforced by my mother.

I spent the rest of my childhood reading and learning everything I could about tortoises. It didn't take me long to pick out my favorite one. Lonesome George was a male Pinta Island tortoise and he was the last of his kind. I knew how George felt. I didn't have many friends because nobody thought tortoises were as cool as I did. On the first day of school I would always bring my turtle shell lunch box filled with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to school. I would always get made fun of and called slow. I was told that turtles and tortoises were stupid. I minded my own business knowing that slow and steady always wins the race.

Soon I got put into a special class for kids like me. I could never focus in class as I was always jumping off the walls. I refused to do any schoolwork that was not even tangentially related to tortoises. Being in this special class didn't help with making friends.





For my 15th birthday my mom told me that she was taking me to the Galapagos National Park. I was beyond excited. I knew Lonesome George was there. He was the rarest creature in the world - what I wanted to be. I didn't mind not having any friends. George didn't have any friends, and everybody seemed to make a big deal out of him. I also had my mom who was my shell. She always protected me whenever I was having a bad day.

On the plane ride to the Galapagos Islands, I was bouncing up and down in my seat with excitement. I had read news articles and scientific studies on George every day for the past four years. I had posters of him in my room and paintings of him that I made in art class at school. I never questioned my life up until this trip. I was using George as a role model and he told me that slow and steady wins the race. It didn't matter if I wasn't doing so well in some areas of my life. All I had to do was to keep going, slow and steady.

I knew that my mom, who had been left by my dad a few years back, couldn't easily afford this trip. I didn't question it because it was the greatest gift in the entire world, but the issue still nagged at me. I think the worry didn't go away because every time I looked into my mom's eyes she looked sad instead of excited. When our plane landed, we took a taxi to the hotel room. We flung our bags into the room as fast as we could and made the short walk over to the park. Everything in my body felt light. The world was opening up to me and I was ready for it. I was finally about to meet the rarest creature on the planet. There was a line to get into the park, so my mother and I made a stop at the gift shop. There I immediately picked out a sweatshirt that read Lonesome George on the front in bright gold letters. On the back it was designed to look like George's shell. My mother bought it for me and I fit snug within it.

Lonesome George was found dead earlier that day. I can still remember the burning of my tears as I clutched my mother in the hotel room. I wore that sweatshirt for the next six months; everyday, no matter what I was doing. Rain or shine, cold or hot, I wore that sweatshirt. My mom washed it every night even as she became weaker. I stopped bouncing off the walls in class and I was moved back into the normal rooms. I still didn't make any friends.

I moved through the monotonous days on autopilot, waiting for my life to have meaning once again. All my actions had been justified when George was alive but after his death, I just felt stupid. I wasted my childhood obsessing over tortoises while all the other kids were making friends, playing sports, and developing social skills.

The only time I ever took the sweatshirt off was for my mother's funeral when I was 16. This was the worst day of my life. I soon realized that it wasn't George who had turned me into this hollow person it was losing my mother. The day George died was only the first day I could tell that she was getting sick.

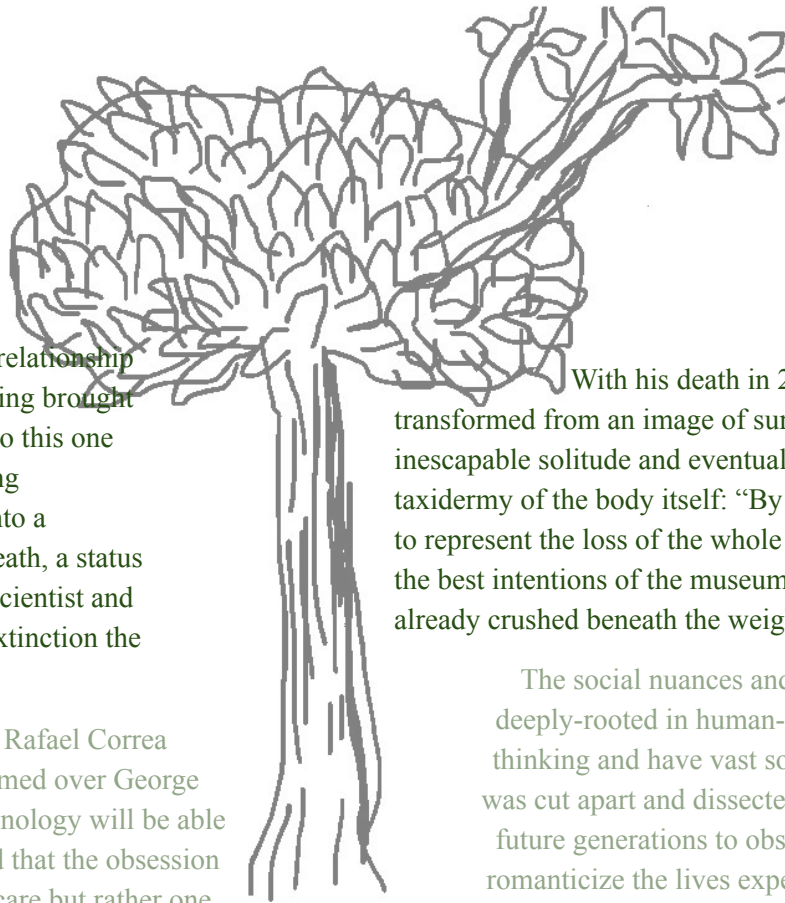
The day after the funeral I put the tortoise shell sweatshirt back on. It saved me from having to talk about anything that had to do with myself or my family. It was my first line of defense for the outside world. I could always talk about Lonesome George, his story, his shell. Therefore, I didn't have to talk about mine. One question still nags at me. Why am I still wearing the shell if there's nothing on the inside to protect? I was just stuffed full of nothingness like George in his taxidermized state. Does my longing for the sweatshirt mean that there's hope for me? Or is it just a boy clutching for the safety that his mother used to provide.

It turns out I wasn't the rarest creature in the world like George was. I had failed to emulate that quality of his. Instead the only characteristic I gained from my obsession was the loneliness that can only be acquired as the last of a species.

In 1971 a single male Pinta Island Tortoise was discovered in the Galapagos, from then forth George became a glorified symbol for conservation because of his mark as an endling, thus erasing his identity as an individual and instead becoming a representation of his species, a performance that was only furthered through his death and taxidermy.

Species-oriented thinking followed and marked the relationship between humanity and George as his title as an endling brought mass media attention and a world-wide fascination to this one tortoise. His fame was inescapable and all-consuming transforming this tortoise from a single individual into a representation for the human fear and finality and death, a status that only followed George's body past his death as scientist and conservationist, even now, hold a deep hope to de-extinction the Pinta Island species in the future.

A statement made by the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa exemplifies the species-oriented thinking that loomed over George during his life and death, "one day, science and technology will be able to reproduce him, to clone him." His death revealed that the obsession over George was not one made out of empathy or care but rather one formed through a societal and scientific obsession to control nature, an ideology based in the belief of human-supremacy over the natural world.



The spectacle of what Bezan labels the 'preservation obsession' often becomes more important to society than the individual endling itself, with the death of George discourse surrounding both the taxidermied body as well as the genetic information saved and stored by conservationists.

With his death in 2012, Lonesome George was transformed from an image of survival and resilience to one of inescapable solitude and eventual decay, only furthered by the taxidermy of the body itself: "By utilizing the demise of the individual to represent the loss of the whole species, endling taxidermy is, despite the best intentions of the museum curators who display it, always already crushed beneath the weight of its own metonymic function."⁷

The social nuances and repercussions to taxidermy are deeply-rooted in human-centric as well as species-oriented thinking and have vast social consequences. George's body was cut apart and dissected not for him, but for humanity, for future generations to observe in a museum somewhere and romanticize the lives experiences of this singular individual.

Through the taxidermy and display of George the entire history and legacy of his species is forced upon his corpse for as long as he's displayed like some sort of doll.

In 2012 an article was released in the Biological Conservation Journal about the discovery of 17 tortoises possessing Chelonoidis Abingdoni (Pinta Island Tortoise) ancestry in the Wolf Volcano area. This discovery was made by isolating the Pinta Island Tortoise gene using archived genetic data to create a base data set, and then using the existing blood samples of tortoises in the Wolf Volcano area to cross reference any tortoise that matched.

Now in January 2020, a 10 day scientific trip with 45 rangers and scientists covered around 77 miles of Wolf Volcano, and discovered 31 hybrid tortoises with ancestry linking back to two types of extinct Galapagos tortoise from the Pinta island, and from the Floreana island. Ten of the 31 specimens had not been identified, but possessed visually apparent traits known to Pinta and Floreana island tortoises, and will be genotyped to discover what their genetic breakdown is.

Definition



Genotype: Genetic body of an organism

Galapagos Conservatory. “BREAKING: Expedition to Wolf Locates Tortoise with Pinta Genes.” *Galapagos Conservatory*, 31 Jan. 2020, www.galapagos.org/newsroom/wolf-expedition-2020/.

Edwards, Danielle L., et al. “The Genetic Legacy of Lonesome George Survives: Giant Tortoises with Pinta Island Ancestry Identified in Galapagos.” *Biological Conservation*, vol. 157, Jan. 2013, pp. 225–228.

