



# OTHER NATIONS

MUSINGS ON ANIMALS

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# TWO PHOTOS TAKEN OUTSIDE GUBBIO

Haggard wolf eye  
sees him coming—a  
small man  
barefoot, empty  
handed.

*I*  
*will eat him.*

More lonely than  
ravenous, the  
wolf leans  
into the open  
hand,  
weeping.



# SINGERS IN THE STORM

It began with a wind murmuring in an ancient and new voice; the sea nations heard, and only one man. He told his wife, who said, "Ah, you're drunk again." His sons thought the same. Their wives said nothing and listened. Then, they, too, heard the voice of the wind, and gathering close their garments, grew quieter still. They carried cool water to their father-in-law as he, in obedience to the voice, hauled rough-cut planks of cedar—hard labor for a six-hundred-year-old-man.

His sons watched their wives and then began to listen and soon to hear and help their father. The old man's wife never heard the voice; nevertheless, she cooked, washed, and mended their clothing, and dreamed of being a grandmother.

Poised in twilight, she quivers from nose to tail, smelling, feeling, awash in wind. He steps out of the blackness of the trees. Utterly still, they fathom each other and the wind. Delicate, polished black adamantine hooves tamp ground. Gracile limbs powered by iron-sprung haunches, and chests deep and wide for drinking the wind, leap together into the wind-tide, eastward—the stag and his mate.

The wind furrows the backs of the pack lounging outside the den, digesting their kill and watching pups stalk and maul each other. It is not the alpha wolf who rises, shakes himself, pricks his ears, and begins to lope due east, moon rising in his eyes, but a young dog a year

before his prime. The she-wolf with sloe eyes running east converges with his path and matches her stride with his. They cover ground their huge feet seem not to touch, running swiftly, running for days on end, running without rest, without weariness, as if born on the wind itself.

The Matriarch weeps and flings her head from side to side, swaying and stamping in grief. Her sister caresses her, but she will not be comforted. A wind has swept over them at the watering place. The young one lifts her trunk to read it, closes her eyes and seems to go within. The Matriarch watches, helpless to affect some terrible thing she knows is happening. Her daughter steps up out of the water, trots into the wind and leaves the family. (The bull sees her coming, tiny by his measure, and his eyes fill with tears. He has known many females who have suffered his attention, but this one, so young, will need his care.)

Among twigs and leaves, across vines and loose stones, huge paws land and break nothing, disturb nothing, make no sound: a step he can maintain at all but his top speed. He moves, shadow among shadows, knowing she is there, not by her scent, for she is not in season, nor by her cry, for she makes none. Gold with green-gold eyes, she waits. He approaches. A growl, begun by instinct, surges from his belly. He ignores it. She, who before the wind would have feared him, now whirls and without caution begins to run. He is a loner, but he will go with her. They have been chosen.

Thus, the wind, the wind of doom, the reckoning wind, wind of the Lord's own sorrow, sweeps the earth. Destroyer and Preserver. For as it summons the clouds and churns the waters

it chooses some to cipher its message. Antennae throb, whiskers maneuver, tails twitch, and sticky red tongues snap out to taste. Guard hairs stand erect, muscles tighten and release in speed or lumbering strength, in stealth or ground-close scurrying, each according to his nature, each according to her kind. From dens and aeries, balmy plains and the murky depths of jungle and swamp; from blazoned snow-lands, dappled forest worlds, and shadowless deserts, they come. Answering the wind. Each in his own way. Each in her own time. They come.

The old man stands at the threshold of the ark, chills shoot up his spine in spite of the heat. His knees shake and his eyes stream. (He is always maudlin in his cups, but he's had nothing to drink for weeks.) He built the ark in obedience, on faith, knowing for whom he was building it. For *them*—but seeing them—in their numbers, in their unbearable humility, in their strength and fragility—he weeps.

The first to come are the birds, alighting on the roof of the ark—from little brown birds, so plain they disappear against the rough wood, to birds of such bright plumage they take his breath, he has never seen such glory. Such ones exist in the world! He hadn't dreamed.

They come without fear two by two. The horizon flows rivers of beings: multitudinous forms, shaggy and sleek, scaled and smooth.

They come hopping on twos, prancing on fours; feet padded, flippered, clawed, webbed, hoofed; or they slither on none, making good time still.

They come, shells on their backs, pouches on their fronts, horns on their heads or protruding out their mouths; in colors of rainbows, and of old leaves. The clowns. The majestics.

They come, eyes like moons or setting suns, like mossy pools sunlit from below, like fire-

lit ice or haunted brown of unknown depths.

They come with fingers and toes, grasping tails and old-man-like faces, scampering up the ramp like wizened children.

Lizards of a size that could only have been spawned from his most drunken nightmare steadfastly plod up the gangplank.

Tiny, many-eyed, many-legged creatures float by, or cling to the backs and heads and tails of larger folk possibly unfelt by them. (There he sees a spider with her mate—he fat and sleepy, looking forward to her spinning them a silver traveling berth; she deigning not to eat him for the present.)

They come, fantastic, beloved of God. All to be cared for. The old man trembles at his responsibility and wants a drink.

For days and nights they come, and the old man's sons take turns holding him up as he greets each one who enters the ark. Finally the last two arrive: a small white dog and a small brown one. The old man does not know which is the he and which the she, but it does not matter.

The clouds boil white froth that congeals into a black tide and rolls from earth's edge to earth's edge. Light and color drown in a sea of black. Lightning screeches through the heavens like pain; the earth roars in anguish as she opens. Her fountains gush from the deep.

Then father and sons close the ark, huddle in the lower deck, and listen to the wrath of God. The boat trembles and bravely stands the scathing wind wielding the sword of purgation—water: sustainer of all life, now become destroyer. The ark shudders as if to break apart as the ground is lost to water, and the old man prays, *Please let this thing float*. It does. Still he can not rest. He thinks he hears the wailing of all mankind. He weeps bitterly and covers his head and

cannot hear the singing and does not notice the silence of the animals both inside and outside the ark.

His daughters-in-law quietly roam the vessel stroking soft noses, scratching ears, filling troughs, mangers, and bowls. The small, hairy creatures with their old-man-faces embrace them, play with their earrings, steal their bangles, chatter and make them laugh. The two little dogs trot after them, fearing no one, not even the old bull elephant (wisdom having its place in the ark along with fecundity), who is the resident giant, even beside the mammoth female (of whom he is greatly solicitous for she misses her mother), for he is good and always looks before he steps. The birds of every kind, each with his own song, fill the decks with music. The cats lap milk and purr and lick themselves all over until they gleam in the torch-lit hold. The wolves and bears munch heavy cakes made with every kind of grain and oil and herb, lick each other and doze in beds of straw. The cows, ewes, and she-goats mother the voyagers with their milk, and chew their grasses in the shadows of proud bulls and rams. Creeping things spin themselves into pods and dangle from the rafters.

After forty days and nights the wailing ceases, wind and rain withdraw; the singing subsides. The ark comes to rest on still water. The old man uncovers his head. He opens a window and peers out. Everywhere is water and nothing nothing else. The young women climb to the outside deck, breathe hungrily, loosen their hair and bare their skin to the sun. They scan the watery world for the singers. What kind of beings are they? Angels? They must, of course, be angels. Will they show themselves?

Now they see a blackness shadowing still and strong from the depths of the sea. They hear a mighty rumble and swoosh! as the waters part. Out of the sea before them rises

leviathan—first of creation. She cleaves the water—an impossible ascent from liquid to air, the only solid thing, herself, whirling and falling on her side in a sea-displacing splash. Her hieroglyphic flukes smack the surface as she dives. In the distance, two more such ones of a size they can scarcely comprehend, never having seen mountains at play.

The women feel no fear. As if to reassure them anyway, the little shepherds of the sea appear, dancing around the boat. The women begin to clap and dance. Their men join in. Even the old man's wife peers in awe at the smiling behemoths and the small ones frolicking about their tiny ark in the great great vastness of the spangled sea. The survivors of God's anger behold the beings who flourish beneath the waves, and wonder, and feel at peace.

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For the sea nations had not brought down the Lord's regret. They shone like shining lights in God's eyes. The small ones had asked, in pity for their earth-bound brothers and sisters, that they might, with dolphin mind and agile corporeal forms, encompass and surround them to ease their passage. This the Lord allowed. The giants of the sea, too, felt compassion for the creatures of the land, for the terror that was theirs to come. *What can we do?* they prayed. *We are so large, we will add to their terror if they see us coming at them through the waves. The little ones among them won't even be able to see us as we are. We will be to them like walls, like mountains, like dark moons. Give us a means to comfort them.*

The Lord heard their prayer and gifted them with song. And when the rains came they began to sing and filled the earth and skies and waters with their songs, and the animals stopped scrambling in fear and listened and were comforted and waited as the waters rose. The spheres resounded with song from the little blue planet for an awesome thing was happening there. And

as the waters rose the shepherds came—the dolphins—leaping and laughing, beaming serenity to guide them in joy and peace; compassion filled the stormy seas as they surrounded each dying creature with love, easing her or him into the next world.

*Be not afraid. Nothing dies, all is spirit. All is reborn. Be at peace.*

And men fought each other for higher ground, lost their senses, wailing and cursing, so they could not hear the whales singing them hope and comfort, nor feel dolphin mind ready to guide them safely from the disappearing earth to the infinite realm of light and spirit. Drowned in the maelstrom of their own lamentations, mankind passed over into darkness in needless anguish and wandered till their rage was spent and their fear dissolved. It took a long time for them to find their way to the light.

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The ark floats on. The whales sing now to comfort the survivors who sometimes howl in anguish over lost tribes, or trumpet in grief for memories of wrinkled faces and loving eyes, or pace, restless for a territory to study and conquer. And the old man says his prayers morning and evening and fondles the seeds in his pocket that hold the promise of new vines. His wife soothes him and keeps a close eye on the bellies of her daughters-in-law. His sons repair the boat. The young women love and nurture and are loved and nurtured by the creatures on the ark. The wind rises again. It rocks the ark like a cradle. The sky stays bright, the sun hot, and the waters recede.

The birds leave first.

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The sea of water turned to a sea of mud and still all but the birds could not go far, but the wind sucked the mud dry, and the earth became firm and even green, and the rainbow came, sign of the covenant he had made, the Lord God, with the race of men and the species, every one, he had saved on the ark. And to the minds in the waters who had served the earth's creatures in their dying hours, the Lord God said "You will save and shepherd mankind and sing for the peace of all living things. This is your covenant, first of my children. But you will pay dearly, for the riders of the ark have inherited corruption. You will have to sing them back again and again."

The singing has never stopped.

# THE BALLAD OF THE SAD YOUNG MAN

(BASED ON A TRUE STORY, TOLD BY A FORMER ORCA TRAINER)

I was out of a job, at loose ends, and had time to kill, so I went to see the show. Dolphins flying through hoops in rhythm and sync. Rainbowed splashes. Children squealing. Handclaps and tail flips and a trainer with a mike in his hand: "Thank you. Thank you very much, and Flipper thanks you, too." Paper wrappers snapping. People munching peanuts and popcorn and sucking caramel off their teeth. Sun hats adjusted. Sunglasses pushed up sweaty noses. A murmur like a wave wells through the crowd. Then the silence of anticipation. "Ladies and Gentlemen: ORCA! THE KILLER WHALE!!!" A gate melts into the water; a giant shape, ebony and alabaster, glides over it soundlessly, dives deep and leaps gleaming, pure in his whiteness, absolute in his blackness, a yin yang of no-color and form. The spectators, awed, cannot clap at once. Rose-cheeked children stare, mouths agape, eyes wide and fearless.

After the show, I made my way back stage and asked for a job, certain they would turn me down. I had no experience. Could I swim? Yes. They hired me. On the spot. Because the trainer, who was no trainer but an out-of-work-actor who would do anything to be in front of a crowd with a mike in his hand, wanted to take his tan to New York but couldn't because of his contract. I made it possible for him to break and run. So, there I was, an orca trainer. "Don't worry. You'll learn the routine. Nothing to it," the actor said. "Watch him, though." He pointed to the orca whose sharp dorsal fin sliced the water as he swam broodingly round and round his

holding tank. So I walked over to have a closer look, and Orca looked at me and I felt his gaze like a jolt of electricity down through my guts to the soles of my feet and up again right out the top of my skull and tears came—from where? for I had not been prepared for this, and I will never be the same again.

It wasn't part of my job, but I spent as many hours with Orca as I could because he was captive and alone and I couldn't help him except to keep him company. Every evening I went to his tank to say goodnight. Once, as I was leaving him, I turned and saw him watching me, one great unfathomable eye framed in the glass window of the tank—watching me as I walked away free.

Most mornings were given to training the dolphins and general maintenance of the performance pool. Audiences were not allowed in until 1:30 for the afternoon shows. On this morning, I was watching Orca swimming quietly in the performance pool where I left him as long as I could every day because it was roomier than his holding tank. We had just finished our play session. (We never trained—there was nothing I could teach Orca. He made up new routines to relieve his boredom, and I had only to be sharp enough to catch on to them.) Enter my least favorite colleague: a cocky young man in love with commanding cetaceans. The dolphins didn't seem to mind him, but Orca didn't like him, and the man especially didn't like Orca.

In a hurry to get through his training session with the dolphins, he jogged out onto the high diving board that extended over the performance pool to regale us all with directions of opening the gate to the orca tank and bringing the dolphins in pronto. The board was slick. He was careless. He slipped and fell feet first into the pool. With cetacean prescience, or perhaps just hopefulness, Orca was poised at the bottom of the pool—just below the diving board.

In the time it took for the dolphin trainer to feel the jaws closing upon him underwater and holding him there, to the moment he felt himself finally lifted into the air, breathing at last but still immobilized, it was obvious that he had acquired the incontrovertible knowledge that Orca held his life in his will; that nothing he could do, and nothing any of us—the trainers, divers, and caretakers—who looked on could do, could save him; that one hairsbreadth miscalculation of a muscle in leviathan's jaws and his ribs would crack like a finch's egg; that he was human and it was humans who held Orca prisoner, made him perform mindless tricks for bits of fish in front of a race of popcorn munchers, stole his dignity and his freedom—he, who had been king of the oceans.

And Orca let him go.

As the dolphin trainer, without even a bruise, scrambled, pale and breathless, out of the water, it was as if we were surrounded by shards of crystal suspended in the air, luminous and tingling. *I can destroy you, but I do not. Because I am an ethical being.* We knew in that shimmery clangor of revelation that we stood in the presence of one with the mind to comprehend his awful and endless predicament and the grace to live without revenge.

I tried everything I could to alleviate Orca's loneliness and boredom, but I was a pathetic substitute for the open seas and the fellowship of his own kind. I tried to justify working for the marina by rationalizing that I cared for Orca, and that I was helping to educate others even if I couldn't save Orca himself. This last myth was dispelled the day a man came backstage after a show wanting to inspect the device that animated our model killer whale. Even after I introduced Orca, the man would not believe he was not seeing some clever, life-like model akin to "Bruce" the shark used in the movie *Jaws*. He stalked away, angry that we were so uncooperative. I wondered, too, what kind of education we gave children. "Come see the

creatures who have no rights of their own, else how are we justified in keeping them captives for your pleasure?" This wasn't the kind of "education" I could be part of any longer.

Night after night, I ached and tried to explain to Orca and to myself why I couldn't stay and watch him die in captivity while I had no resources to free him.

I work now with free dolphins. I wait hours in the sun for them to appear, and I swim with them when they let me. At night, I sit and gaze at the stars. I think of Orca and feel his eyes still following me.

# THE DEVIL'S DUE

St. Peter asks each one  
applying at the gates of heaven,

"Did you ever beat a horse?"

If the answer is 'yes'  
no further questions.

The devil take him.

Next!

If the answer is 'no'

St. Peter checks the balance  
of the person's life.

If evil outweighs the good  
the saint asks,

"Did you ever give water to a thirsty horse?"

Did you ever ease his burden?

Shelter him?

Salve his wounds?

Or keep him from fear?"

If the answer is 'no'

the balance remains weighted in the devil's favor.

St. Peter, quite sadly,

shakes his head.

Next!

If the answer is 'yes'  
to any of the questions  
St. Peter sweeps the dross  
from the devil's side of the balance  
and leads the person into Paradise,  
which is full of horses.

# A CIRCLE OF STONES

DIAN FOSSEY

(B. 1932 D. 1985)

A circle of stones  
On a misty mountain  
Marks the grave  
Of a difficult woman;  
And before its next great adventure  
A spirit lingers for a while,  
Mingling with the mist,  
Close as breath  
To the great gentle ones she loved  
And refrained from embracing in life.

# BELUGA

white-robed  
mona lisa smiling  
madonnas  
of the cold seas

devotees  
at play  
in the  
glacial cathedrals  
of the Most High

white mala pearls  
dancing on the snowy breast  
of the Mother

their songs  
what are they to us?

of what value the spinning wheels of Tibet?  
of what value the sacred chants rising from the ashrams of India?  
of what value the plainsong from the austere monasteries of Europe?  
of what value the smoky meditations of the North American sweat lodge?  
of what value the mighty voice of the Trappists breaking silence only for song?

the saddhu  
the shaman  
Cistercians & Cetaceans

have the world's work to do  
singing us out of the Darkest Age

let us save the whale  
for she may save the world

# SATYAGRAHA

I think you can tell saints,  
not by their miracles and thin faces,  
but by their smiles.

St. Francis, I think, grinned  
from ear to ear  
at a sunbeam or a tree-frog,  
at a child or a pope.

The Buddha smiles  
and is smiling still  
from Katmandu to Riverside Drive

The whales smile  
beaming serenity in man-made charnel seas,  
diving and dancing around our bloody factory ships,  
singing their mantras while we dissect their stolen children,  
living and loving gently through our poisons, wastes, and wars;  
imprisoned, patiently playing our games;  
never repaying us in kind.

They are finally winning us over.

# TO THE LITTLE BROWN SNAKE I ENCOUNTERED IN THE DRIVEWAY OF UNITED JERSEY BANK ON THE MEADOWLANDS

I expected you to slither away  
I intended that you should  
(I wanted you off the road  
where you would not be fodder  
for the unforgiving treads of a tire)  
So small and new to life  
you rose to face me  
in a delicate spiral  
your tiny black tongue darted defiance  
at me, a giant in your world

I don't know what kind of snake you are  
in your sleek suit of herringbone tweed  
I don't know much about snakes  
except that the serpent nation  
carries the burden of human fear and hatred  
It was not always so  
Once you were chosen the symbol of healing  
but even that we turned  
into the very logo of evil  
as healing art transmogrified and spawned  
the pain-giver—the vivisector

Little brown snake  
such courage in a tiny new being—I marvel  
Lovely, aerodynamically perfect  
secure in yourself  
you rest in your spiral  
and will not be moved  
will not skitter off in fright  
at my gentle nudging  
at my monstrous presence  
at my foolish attempts to shoo  
you back into the tall grass  
Should I pick you up and put you there?  
It is cold and damp in the sheltering weeds  
and you will only seek the warmth of the pavement once again  
It is after five; I see no cars  
Perhaps there will be no more killing wheels today  
So I will spare you that indignity  
and leave you your autonomy

I wish you long life  
May the TAILOR fashion you  
many such tweedy suits as you grow  
May you take your leisure through golden days  
on warm rocks safe from tires and  
frightened humans with gunny sacks, sticks, and knives

Little brown snake  
may you live your life  
free from the terrible burden that  
Man-Symbol-Maker has placed on your kind

for we have laid upon your slender form  
all that we fear and loathe in ourselves  
Little brown snake....

# A RUNNER'S MEDITATION

I saw a muskrat in the park  
chewing grasses with perfect attention  
in a pool of sunlight that turned gold the tips of her  
glistening chestnut hair.

I'd seen her before  
at just the end of the dark  
swimming the shallow stream that  
winds through the park;  
just a smooth parting of the water;  
then her endearing waddle  
as she brought from the bank  
the right twig, longer than herself  
and fringed in new leaves.  
Clasping it firmly in delicate jaws  
she melted into the water and swam again  
and with a flip disappeared  
into a hole in the bank.

I was pleased to know she was there  
going about her business,  
and confident in her wisdom  
to come out only before dawn,  
before joggers and dog-walkers,  
before anxious mothers could cry "RAT!"  
to the park authorities in their ill-fitting green costumes.

Today she sits in the sun.

Civil and lovely.

Surely she deserves to sit in the sun?

Does she think people so kind?

# IN MOURNING

I saw a muskrat in the park  
lying at an entrance to her home,  
oval mound of underbelly exposed,  
tiny feet with long shapely nails  
curled gracefully in death.  
Her buck teeth protrude slightly  
between parted lips.  
Her chestnut hair, rustled by the breeze,  
still glistens.

There are no wounds.  
Poison, then.

Feeling ill, did she try to make it home  
and get only this far,  
to her doorstep?  
Or was she underground  
and did she want to die in the sun?

# CETACEAN SUNSET

the whales smile  
as still crews gaze  
with lowered sails while  
the whale calf plays

flip flops  
pirouette  
spy hops  
silhouette

sunset glows  
and stains the water  
like blood that flows  
from whales at slaughter

flip flops  
pirouette  
spy hops  
silhouette

but these men pray  
'may your kind increase'  
and sail away  
on winds of peace

flip flops

pirouette  
spy hops  
silhouette

# MEANTIME/DREAMTIME

(OR, HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION)

I board the plane  
the attendant says  
with a quizzical look  
at my boarding pass  
"You're the vegetarian?"

I dream of the day  
when a traveler will board  
and the steward will say  
with a questioning rise of his eyebrow...  
"You're the carnivore?"

but, in the meantime  
a woman cries  
an animal dies  
and the Indians dream of home

(there's a paper in my pocket  
with some numbers written on it  
I feel the numbers throb  
and the phrase that sets the beat  
hammers at my chest  
"every fifteen seconds  
a woman is beaten by a man she knows"  
this time she lives  
only her joy is dead)

I'm in a car  
on a country road  
sitting next to one  
who cries, "Look! Cows!  
Stop the car.  
They are so beautiful!  
I will commune with cows!"  
and she wafts to the fence  
her sentiment flying  
above the white-faced red  
ones who placidly chew  
and happily nuzzle  
their wobbly calves  
post card pretty to be sure  
and I think (not kindly, I confess)  
*commune with the cow*  
*that rots in your gut*  
*commune with her*  
for my car-mate  
ate cow for lunch

I dream of the day  
when cows can be  
for the beauty they give  
a landscape (in small numbers)  
and the comfort they find  
in each other  
and in being garlanded with  
flowers by children  
who love them

and tell them secrets

in the meantime

a woman cries

an animal dies

and the Indians dream of home

at a Chippewa pow wow

the dancers stop

when an eagle's feather is found

on the grass fallen

from a dancer's lance

an elder appears

sprinkles a sacred substance

he carries in a pouch

speaks the sacred words

before touching the feather

bearing it with reverence

off the dancing ground

I am on the highway

a possum lies dead by the road

a raccoon lies dead by the road

no—two together

a turtle crosses, life's burden upon her back

she makes her slow slow way

across the hot road

miraculously missing

wheels spinning death

out on the highway

a porcupine lies dead on the road  
a young doe lies dead on the road  
her body of exquisite grace  
and delicacy lies crumpled  
and broken dead by the road

(the numbers throb against my chest  
"every 15 seconds a woman is beaten by a man she knows"  
this time she lives  
only her dreams have died)

a badger lies dead by the road  
a possum lies dead by the road  
a squirrel lies dead by the road

I dream of the day  
when the wheels will turn more slowly and if  
we kill it is with sorrow  
and in grief will we stop  
and look upon what we have done  
and bear the broken body of  
whomever we've destroyed  
bear it with reverence from the killing ground  
chant the sacred song  
and make atonement till the killing stops

but in the meantime  
a woman cries  
an animal dies  
and the Indians dream of home

I see on TV  
a woman is raped by her father  
from the time she is three  
until she is 18 and tries to kill him  
she is convicted of attempting murder  
she is in prison  
he is free

(the numbers beat against my chest  
"every 15 seconds  
a woman is beaten by a man  
by a man she knows"  
this time she dies)

I dream of the day when the life of a woman  
is as valued as  
the life of a man  
  
in the meantime  
the animals cry  
the women die  
an Indian dreams of home

# THE EYE OF THE WHALE

(based loosely on a published interview with Paul Watson)

I looked into the eye of the whale  
and saw the person looking back at me,  
and she said to me,  
"You are witness.  
You cannot now turn away,"  
nor could I.  
Cords of light  
cords of steel  
bind me to her  
for all time  
and wherever I am,  
and wherever she is  
they are my burden.  
They are my joy.

# BUFFALO

The thunder is gone from the plains  
The prairie has lost her rumblings  
The robe that lay from the mighty  
Mississippi to the Rockies, its fringes  
reaching the western shore  
was rent, destroyed, and wasted.  
What remains is a remnant  
of the garment that clothed the New World.

*Buffalo spirit awakens*

*The bulls are in rut*

*The cows bellow for children*

*We deny them at our peril*

# MEDITATION ON MARK 1:13

(" .....AND HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS...")

I. He went into the wilderness to fast and pray.  
After forty days and nights they came  
as He knew they would, as He had hoped they would not:  
the fears and doubts, desires, despair.  
His humanness raged within Him.  
He cried for humanity and for Himself.  
He fought a human's battle with only human weapons.

II. Ragged and weary  
in unproud triumph  
He lies in sand,  
awash in wind  
and sun, asleep.  
They come,  
one by one,  
and form a gathering,  
silent as Quakers  
and just as full:  
the beasts.  
No angel,  
Jew, or Gentile,  
but the lion stands  
in ageing majesty,  
against the sun  
a cool shadow  
for His rest.

Pariah dogs,  
lupine, devoted,  
he on one side,  
she on the other,  
lick His face clean  
of tears and sweat,  
awakening Him  
to tickly tongues  
and wolfy grins.  
The lizard, kaleidoscoping  
green and brown  
and rose scuttles  
into the shelter  
of His sleeve,  
while the locust,  
God's soldier, flutters  
to His knee to rest,  
all pink and glowing  
in the sunset. The vulture  
with feathers tucked modestly  
beneath her like a taffeta  
skirt, sits, a gleaming black  
matron, beside  
the school-girl dove  
who has followed Him  
and watched over Him  
since His cousin's watery  
blessing. The snake,  
pretty and sleek,  
coils humbly, contentedly,  
at His feet,

shining like  
a jewel in the light  
of the rising moon.  
The ram, escaped  
from the safety and bloody  
end of the flock  
gone wild  
gone free  
stands serene,  
blinking in the twilight.  
A desert rat,  
soft and brown,  
climbs into His lap,  
puts tiny feet  
up on His chest  
to examine Him, close,  
with earnest dark eyes  
and snuffling nostrils.  
Satisfied all  
is well with Him now,  
he scurries away  
on a private mission.  
The jackal, shying  
among the shadows,  
He calls  
into the circle.

Who knows the mind of a beast or the mind of God?

Who can tell what flows between?

The lion weeps

as He strokes his shagged  
and scarry face.  
Gripping the grizzled mane  
He rises  
and they lead Him to water.  
The rat erupts  
from a tiny dune  
with figs for His nourishment  
from a personal trove.  
Refreshed, He plays  
with them. The dogs,  
wiggling, eager  
for games, play tag  
with Him. The ram  
joins in. The vulture  
and the dove, silhouetted  
against the moon  
dance and dive  
to His applause  
as the lizard somersaults  
in miraculous circles  
between earth and sky.  
The locust clings  
to His shoulder, informally  
keeping score.  
And the snake rising  
in her delicate spiral  
sways in soundless harmony  
to the rhythm of their play.  
The jackal chuckles,  
sprawled like a pup

on the sand, belly up,  
feet akimbo, giving in  
to the joys of the romp.  
Even the lion  
remembers some kittenish  
glee in a mock wrestle  
with this gentle man.

III. I thought I heard an echo of something said  
at a place in the desert a long time ago  
where a man went to find Himself and finally  
breaking His solitude before His fast sought the company  
of animals. Why He did this is not so hard to fathom.  
Why does anyone seek the company of animals? For refreshment  
and companionship,  
and a communion unattainable with most of our own kind.  
Perhaps this man had deeper reasons.  
And He, unlike most, might have known how to speak to them.  
The echo I hear is this:

"No more scapegoats, my friends.  
No more sacrifices.  
No more blood of the lamb  
on the altar stone.  
No more dead pigeons.  
No more an eye for an eye,  
a tooth for a tooth,  
for I AM the eye,  
and I AM the tooth.  
Humans are a blood-loving race.  
(The earth has never cried for blood,  
nor the heavens either.)

Their hunger and thirst  
for flesh and blood shall be sated.

I AM become you.

And this is the beginning of the end."

And so, the lion wept.

IV. They came, across miles, some of them,  
and formed a gathering:  
the lion, the ram,  
the jackal, and the locust,  
the lizard, pariah dogs,  
the snake, the vulture,  
the dove (she had never  
really left Him),  
and the small brown rat.....  
they were there, on the misty heels  
of the angel who rolled away the stone,  
before the Marys, to greet Him  
in quiet, doubt-less welcome,  
when He walked out of the tomb.

# HUMPBACK!

## **GENTLE SEA GRAZER**

a flash of hieroglyphic flukes  
the humpback dives  
to graze her watery meadows  
gentle lady of the sea  
the largest life  
gleaning the smallest  
for the richest milk on earth  
to nourish the fat warm calf, beloved,  
at her side  
Celebrate Leviathan!

## **BREACH!**

a rumble  
like the feeling of a sonic boom  
SWOOSHS!!!  
she cleaves the water  
an impossible ascent  
from liquid to air  
the only solid thing  
herself whirling  
falling on her side  
a sea-displacing splash  
Celebrate, Leviathan!

## **AND SING!**

one who dares to listen  
must cry 'Bind me to the mast!"  
for hers is a song  
to make you weep and wonder  
a song to break your heart  
stirring things deeply remembered  
and long forgotten  
primal and futuristic  
the humpback sings!  
Celebrate Leviathan!

# THE SUBWAY MOUSE

She lives in thunder,  
foraging in meadows  
of steel and concrete  
amid slimy pools  
sources unspeakable  
she ekes a living  
from human garbage.

And still she lives,  
and wants to live.

Steel bites steel  
and spits fire  
over the place  
her soft body was  
a heart-beat ago  
before she disappeared  
beneath the rail  
into a dank world  
far from sun and air  
and fragrant rooty earth.

And still she lives,  
and wants to live.

# LEXICOLOGY-DOXOLOGY

Think of all the words (in English, now)  
we have for *bringing death*—  
like Eskimos for *snow*.

The Cides family: Matri & Patri

Infanti & Fratra,

Homo & Geno & Sui.

Assassination for the one: massacre, the many.

There's slaughter, manslaughter,  
execution (divine retribution)  
and murder (in degrees).

There's putting down (to euthanize)  
and taking out (refers to spies),  
kill & destroy.

Much to my astonishment  
there's still capital punishment.

And clean words for modern times:

Harvest: for meaning, ask the doe, ask the seal

Sacrifice: ask any bullock or kid, ram or calf, ask any hog,  
rat, dog, cat, monkey, or soldier

Management: ask the wolf or the bison; ask the Sioux, the  
Cherokee, the Arapaho, Hopi, Apache, Navaho

Process: ask the chicken, ask the lamb; ask the wind in the  
grass at Auschwitz

Think of all the words (in English, now)  
we have for *love*—  
like Eskimos for *palm tree*.

# HEALING SKYDOG

Wounded.

Hurt in hide and bone and equine spirit (which dances warily in his eyes).

I fan that flame as my life's work.

He leans into my hands

as I knead his muscles and

coax a shine to his coat.

He is knitting himself together,

but he will never be seamless.

Lightning streaks his left shoulder

down his chest

across his flank.

Signs of his suffering.

I have shown him my back,

the twisted white lightning

that marks forever my own history of bad weather.

By our scars we are made relatives.

I was healed through another's hands

and through my hands I pass this healing to SkyDog.

Feeling his wounds heal,

I watch his soul leap up to take the wind

and feel my own do the same.

I can see the flickering wounded soul of a horse.

# EPIPHANY

"Dress for a Minnesota winter, then you'll be warm enough on the boat," her granddaughter admonished her. "No matter how warm it feels on shore, once you're out there on the water, it's cold." Hildy had had eighty-three Minnesota winters during which to practice dressing. Cold she wouldn't be.

She took her time unpacking and arranging her things. She hated living out of a suitcase. There was no time now to get to the wharf for this afternoon's whale-watch, and anyway, she was all in from the trip. The train ride had been pleasant, but the last leg of the journey on that bone-rattling bus without a working lavatory had been pure hell. "I'm going to write a thing or two to that bus company when I get home, believe you me!" she muttered. It was such a relief to be here she wasn't feeling her excitement yet. It lay dormant, shrouded by exhaustion. Years of dreaming about this trip, months of planning—What a fuss! *A body'd have thought I wanted to go to the moon instead of the East Coast, for Pete's sake!* She slammed the top drawer of the hotel dresser shut on her underthings, still annoyed with her daughters. Especially Leona: "What in the world do you want to go on a whale watch for, of all things, at your age?" Marion had been not much better, though not as vocal.

"At my age!" Hildy snorted. "Now is not the time to be putting things off." After carrying on to high heaven they had finally accepted the idea and began making her plans for her. Oh, the looks on their faces when she told them her plans were already made! She chuckled. They were especially put out when she declined the pleasure of anybody's company. Even Annie, her best friend. Even Kari. "The child is busy with her own life. What does she

want to go traipsing off to Provincetown with an old lady for? Besides, she's already been there." And Annie couldn't go, even if she had wanted to (which she didn't), because she was moving into Hildy's apartment to look after Bonnie and Clyde, Hildy's cats, who were too precious to be entrusted to her daughters. Annie needed a break from the retirement home where she lived and would take care of them nicely.

Kari met Hildy at La Guardia and put her up for the night in her Lower East Side apartment. *What a horror!* Hildy thought when she first entered the cramped, semi-basement apartment. But the girl was a tidy housekeeper and seemed not to notice what Hildy could only describe as squalor. Hildy reminded herself that standards were different in the city, and she kept quiet. She did not want to be like Leona, Kari's mother, harping on every detail.

"Gram, if you wait a few days, I can go with you."

"I want to go alone."

"Why?" Kari wasn't challenging, just curious.

"This is something I've wanted to do for fifteen years. Don't fuss." *You're the only one I give a snap about, Precious.*

"You didn't tell Mom that you didn't book a return flight."

"Of course not. She'd have had another fit. She likes to know the beginning, middle, and end of a thing before it happens. Why in Sam Hill do anything then?"

"She's going to be furious."

"Sweetheart, that's how I'll know I'm dead, when your mommy stops being mad at me."

Kari smiled a little. "What am I supposed to tell her when she calls?"

"Tell her the truth. I don't want you in hot water with her on my account. I'll be back when I'm good and ready. Now, Precious, make those calls for me. I don't hear so good over the

phone."

Hildy took out a much-folded piece of paper from the side pocket of her purse and handed it to her granddaughter. "Amtrak is first, you see. Then the bus. The train only goes as far as Providence. Don't ask me why. The bottom number there, you see, is the hotel. It's an inn or something like that. They have this package deal. I get a free whale watch for every weekend I stay there."

"What if they don't have any rooms? This is very short notice."

"My land, it's only May! They'll be empty. They'll be tickled pink to have me."

"How long do you want to stay?"

"As long as it takes. I don't expect the whales to rally around the boat just because I'm on it."

"They have sightings just about every day in season, Gram."

"I don't want to just gawk at them like some Yay-hoo! I want to meet them properly. And I want to see dolphins. Oh, Land! I want to see dolphins. They don't come around every day. I can tell you that!" Hildy waved her finger in the air. "Make it for two weeks to start."

"This is going to be kind of expensive, isn't it?"

"I've planned for it. Don't worry. I have plenty of travelers' checks right here." Hildy patted the side of her purse. "I mean to use them all if I have to."

Kari was hesitant, but Hildy knew she'd make the calls. *You're nothing like your mother, thank the Lord.* Then she thought, *It's a good thing we mortal humans aren't yet telepathic. Whales and dolphins, they say, are.*

She found herself gazing at Kari, drinking her in, savoring every detail of this small auburn-haired young woman, her only grandchild, who, in looks, was a throwback to Ed—the

curly, baby fine hair, brown eyes, the small straight nose and rosy skin. Hildy's eyes blurred. She fished in her purse for a tissue and took off her glasses to clean them. Now she could hardly see a blessed thing. She couldn't tell any more if the glasses made things better or worse. Just different. The eyes were nearly gone, just like everything else.

She finished hanging up her shirts in the closet, including the wool Pendleton—still the warmest single thing she owned—that had been Ed's. Her pants and sweaters were folded in the bottom drawer of the dresser, and she put the empty suitcase in the back of the closet out of sight.

Then she took her overnight bag into the bathroom and drew a bath while she arranged her toothpaste, lotions, and dusting powder on the sliver of counter space around the sink. She was bone tired—more tired than hungry. She had raisins and an apple in her purse if she wanted something later. Of all the foolishness. At my age! She smiled and shook her head. A plane. A train. A bus. Then a cab to get here from the bus station. Tomorrow morning, a cab would again carry her to a boat that would take hours to get to a place somewhere out in the ocean to see whales. *And maybe, if I'm lucky, dolphins! Wouldn't that be grand!* Grand foolishness!

Some excitement tingled through her aches and weariness. She had read that she could expect to see humpbacks here, perhaps a fin whale, although they were very shy and seldom came near a boat. And dolphins. She ached with longing to see dolphins. She took her empty overnight bag back to the bedroom and put it in the closet with her suitcase. Then she took off her sturdy sneakers and put them next to a pair much the same, but a half size larger so she could wear extra heavy socks inside them. She didn't want cold feet on the boat. She slipped into her Deerfoams, a present from Annie, and padded back into the bathroom.

The tub was full. She tested the water to make sure it was the right temperature, then

undressed and very carefully lowered herself into the water. She had to be careful in everything she did. It was so tiresome. Though she pretended to her daughters that she didn't. Leona's ever mournful cry "What if she breaks a hip!" had become the family joke, she wailed it so often, whenever Hildy wanted to do anything. But Hildy knew it was no joke. Her body had been failing her, betraying her little by little over the years. It could no longer be trusted. Worst of all were her hands and wrists. "I can't even pick up my cast iron skillet anymore," she complained to Annie. "I had to give all my cast iron to Marion. Now I use these little aluminum things. I hate them. But—no strength left. Anyway, the only thing I fry nowadays is my pancakes. Don't taste any good without my skillet, but there's no help for that." She didn't even trust herself to pick up her cats. She always sat and let them jump on her lap for petting. She also had to be aware of balance in everything she did. Once her balance was lost, she knew there would be no catching herself, even if she had something to grab on to. Her wrists wouldn't hold her.

She soaked a few minutes to ease out the kinks and then scrubbed herself all over. She climbed out of the tub, carefully, and dried off with the hotel towels that were much more luxurious than what she was used to, put on her bloomers and her undershirt, then slipped a cotton nightgown over it all. She crawled into bed, even though there was plenty of light left and settled back against the pillows. She planned to read for awhile, then perhaps doze a little, then...

Something jangled in her ear. It took another two rings for her to orient herself and pick up the telephone.

"Hello? Mrs. Flannigan? This is your wake-up call."

"My land! What time is it?"

"Five o'clock, Ma'am."

"In the morning?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

A wake up call! Now that was something. And it didn't cost anything extra, either. Kari had told her to ask for one at the desk when she checked in, and it was a good thing, too.

She got dressed and found the card that the cab driver had given her. It said, "Marvin...the only cab in town" which was quite literally true. He had been over-talkative, for Hildy's taste, but he'd carried her luggage in, didn't require a tip, and just before he left, had handed her his card. "Call me any time," he said winking, which annoyed her further. "Special rates for Senior Citizens." Hildy took the card and sniffed. *Senior Citizen, my eye. He's no spring rooster himself.* Still, she accepted the special rate. She dialed his number.

The wharf was like a street on stilts projecting far out over the water, a far cry from any of the docks she had known in Minnesota, even on the biggest lakes she had visited. It was so wide that even with the small buildings that perched along either edge there was room for motorized traffic. She walked straight down the middle of it. This early there was very little activity. Seagulls squatted in various places over the dock, some at rest on the top of poles and coils of rope. One concession selling hot coffee and chowder was already open. Some places seemed to sell bait and tackle, some, those without signs, were perhaps privately owned. She didn't know where to go but she kept her eyes open. *I'll see other people boarding a boat or something. I'll just ask.*

She didn't have to. Ahead of her she saw a ticket booth not much bigger than a phone booth with people gathered around, tickets in hand, parkas and jackets slung over their shoulders. Above the booth she saw the words **DANCER FLEET** painted in blue on a white board sawed in the shape of a waving banner. That was her fleet. Beyond she saw two more ticket booths, similar to this one but in different colors. She couldn't read their names, but it didn't matter.

According to Kari, the Dancer Fleet was the best. The captains were more concerned with the comfort and safety of the whales than the convenience and curiosity of their passengers. They never moved in too close or too fast, and if there was already a boat zeroing in on one or more whales, they passed by. Fortunately for them and for the whales, their attitude earned them a reputation that attracted more passengers than it repelled.

Hildy exchanged her hotel coupon for a ticket and stopped to look around again before boarding. Now she was thrilled. The smells out there on the wharf were decidedly fishy and salty. She couldn't describe them any better than that. Different from anything she had ever smelled. The mid-west was earthier, grassier, even around the lakes. Only the piping of the gulls was familiar for she had heard a similar piping when she and Ed had been to Lake Superior the summer before Leona was born. She didn't want to think of that now. It was grand to be in a place that looked and smelled different, where there were few associations with familiar things. Nothing to trigger memories. Everything was fresh and new and she felt almost as if she didn't have a past, or that she could choose any past she liked, it didn't matter. What mattered was here and now, and she liked that feeling very much. She felt her shoulders rise a little as she boarded the boat. On its side was printed *Wave Dancer*. According to the brochure she was given at the inn there were five boats in the DANCER FLEET. She loved their names. *Rainbow Dancer*, *Star Dancer*, *Wind Dancer*, *Blue Dancer*, and her boat today. Good names for cats, she thought, and she wondered how Bonnie and Clyde were getting along without her. The brochure said that only two boats a day went out for public whale watches. At other times they were used by researchers to study the whales, and all too frequently, to rescue whales entangled in plastic fishing nets, no longer a rare occurrence as the oceans became a dumping ground for the nets of the fishing industries of many nations. Hildy had stopped eating seafood when she read of the

carnage produced by this "ghost fishing."

"What good's that going to do?" Annie fussed the first time Hildy refused to eat her fish sticks.

"Maybe no good. Maybe a lot. I don't know. But my conscience is clean. Besides, I won't take food out of the mouths of the creatures I love. I can eat something else. They can't."

"What about the cats? You still feed them cat food. That has fish in it."

"I know. I do what I can. Nobody's perfect. Make me a pancake."

Hildy remembered she hadn't had breakfast yet, so she went inside the cabin. The little kitchen was already fragrant with brewing coffee, clam chowder and frying eggs. She looked up at the menu written in white chalk on a black board. Egg McDolphin, Danish, doughnuts, bagels and rolls. For lunch there would be sandwiches and chowder, more coffee and sodas. No one would starve. She ordered a coffee and a doughnut and nothing ever tasted so good, she thought as she enjoyed her breakfast out in the cold salt air.

Once they were underway, a young woman with a permanent sunburn began to talk about the whales and what they might see today. Hildy paid no attention. She had read books on whales. Their singing, their migrations, care of the young, baleen instead of teeth, their big brains...it was all old news. Hildy found a seat and just watched the light play on the water. This was the *ocean*. Even in an era of space travel, the vastness of the sea was hard for Hildy to comprehend. She tried and found her mind emptying out and expanding till she was almost in a pleasant trance. No wonder people went to sea.

Occasionally someone would sit next to her and try to start a conversation. They were being kind to a cute little old lady alone on a boat. But she had had a life time of making

conversation with people, most of whom she didn't care for. Now she wanted to be alone with the sea and its creatures. She was polite. And they soon wandered on to do their own sea-viewing or to talk with their friends or family.

She heard a rising murmur of delight from the passengers and saw them, herd-like, make their way to one side of the boat. The captain was announcing that humpbacks had been sighted. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you are quiet, and if there is a calf, as there may be, the calf may come over to investigate us.”

Hildy was about to make her own way over to the railing on the other side of the Rainbow Dancer when something straight ahead of her caught her eye. A glistening movement in the water that was not the waves. *Damn these eyes!* She found in the front of the boat a large raised platform, and another, boxlike structure on top of the right at the front—she didn't know anything about boats but it seemed sturdy enough and there were cables attached to it running back and up, apparently affixed to the top of the glassed-in cabin where the captain perched, and steered the ship, with a good view all around. She looked up at him. He was focused to his right, where the humpbacks were leaping out of the water to the ohs and ahs of the passengers and the sound of clicking cameras.

Hildy hauled herself onto the platform and then to the higher box, steadying herself by hanging on to the cable lines.

As she leaned out and tried to focus her eyes on a glint of silver, salt spray carried on the sweet breath of the sea formed droplets like tears on her face. As they reached her lips she licked them and was back in the last row of the ramshackle movie theatre, a life-time ago, where that Gish girl silently portrayed all the sorrow and sweetness of a hopeless love, so that Hildy cried and was embarrassed because it was only her second date with Ed Flannigan. She didn't want

him to catch her crying. She would feel humiliated if he laughed. She risked a glance at him hoping he was looking at the screen and hadn't noticed her tears, and something unfolded inside her when she found him glancing shyly at her with tears of his own wetting his cheeks. They came together, hands touching hands and faces lightly, carressingly, kissing softly and licking the tears from each others' faces, like butterflies at roses—a gentle prelude to a rhapsody that sent her that night, not home to her father's house and her own bed, but to Ed's and his. For ten years that passion danced between them like a joyous flame until it died as astonishingly as it was born, leaving a trail of tender ashes. The memory washed over her in less than a heartbeat as she leaned out trying hard to focus on the movement of silver in the sea. Suddenly she was out of balance and her hand gave up its grip on the cable. She fell forward, toppling over the side into the sea.

The water closed over her at once. Her breath was knocked out of her on impact and the icy cold made her gasp, but she couldn't. Her throat was sealed. There was a searing rip all down her middle, a moment of utter blackness, then she saw them clearly, swimming toward her—six dolphins, gleaming silver in the light-drenched water. "Oh, I was so afraid I wouldn't see you!" They laughed and greeted her with one mind, and yet she could sense clearly six distinct individuals. She understood she could be part of that mind too, and still be herself. She was supremely happy.

"Come with us," they invited.

She followed them feeling a strength and lightness of being that she remembered from a lifetime ago. "I can swim!"

"Of course," they replied. "You can fly, too."

"I can?"

"Yes. You'll see."

"Oh, look." She had turned back to see several people, two in the water and three onboard, struggling to lift out a lumpish, dripping mass. "Oh dear, they should just leave it."

The dolphins laughed again, their gentle merry laugh that she could feel more than hear. "That sort of thing is important to them. Let's go."

She swam with them and they frolicked about her on all sides in water that changed from blue to silver and then to gold. The waters became richer and warmer with golden light as she swam closer, and then she could see stars and systems of stars.

On board the Rainbow Dancer the whale-watchers and crew were in shock. Those that had dived into the water were now shivering inside blankets while others leaned over the lifeless body of the cute little old lady. A woman looked up and out to sea. "Look," she pointed. "Dolphins. If only they had come sooner. They might have saved her."



let it burn

in warehouses, on shelves let it burn

burn in jewel-cases

burn off wrists and fingers

to appease your spirit

let us dance dance

slowly and in sorrow mourning and wailing

in grief and repentance around the fires

it will not be enough

and there isn't time

Teraia lives in a colony on the New Planet where life forms, transplanted from the Old Planet, are all quite small, the largest being the dolphins that swim freely in the human-made bay in front of the house where she lives. (She swims with them every day. They are her best friends.) When she grows up, she wants to be an archeologist, or maybe a paleontologist. She wants to be in one of the teams that are regularly going back to the Old Planet to research the way things were before the Great Dying, to try to figure out what led up to it. The Old Planet is cautiously being resettled, but only by trained ecologists and scientists. Teraia wants to be one of them. She reads the papers every day looking for the latest reports of their findings.

Today there are headlines. **Bones found. Put together.** The article goes on at length about this great find. The news has been kept quiet until enough evidence was gathered. Now it is certain. No doubt about it. Teraia is weeping before she finishes the article. Her mother enters the room and sees her daughter's face contorted in such grief as she cannot imagine the

cause.

"My child, what is the matter? What has happened?"

"Oh, Maman," Teraia weeps, "They were real. The elephants...were real."

