Animal joy: Poems

Eric Fisher Stone
Iowa State University

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Animal joy: Poems

by

Eric Fisher Stone

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
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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

Ames, Iowa

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*Poets Reading the News:* "Blue Ridge Blues," "Whale Full of Grace"
*Riggwelter:* "Poem to my Childhood"
ABSTRACT

The following thesis, *Animal Joy* explores environmental and anthrozoological issues such as animal cognition, extinction, and weighs the problem of finding joy during our ecologically and politically tumultuous time. In several poems, the idea of childhood as a romantic ideal is explored. I see my collection, as with all my work up to this point, as part of the American Transcendentalist vision. This vision diffuses hierarchical binaries of human and nonhuman beings, civilization and the natural world, and the sacred and profane into an affirmation of life and the universe. I wanted to create a romantic vision that confronts, not escapes, the Anthropocene during the internet age. My poems believe in the redeeming power of the infant’s faith, the power of the natural world to heal, and universal brotherhood of all life, and all objects in the universe. My poems stand against negation, cynicism and despair. I want to make joy relevant to the 21st century.
PECCARY DANCE

Javelinas beat earth’s carnival drum
and hoof duendes on the desert floor,
dancing a dervish in the air’s freedom.

Their snouts’ pink bells jingle prickly pear plums
and some friends think this creature is a boar.
Javelinas beat earth’s carnival drum

but aren’t pigs; they’re peccaries. I’ve sung
their praises as I know what love is for:
dancing a dervish in the air’s freedom.

They let cholla spikes tickle their tongues,
slumber drunk on cactus juice, dream and snore.
Javelinas beat earth’s carnival drum

in music I’ve missed though they will not come.
When the thundercloud opens like door,
dancing a dervish in the air’s freedom,

they seek rainstorms plumping nopal shucks hung
with purpling nectar. I wait there before
javelinas beat earth’s carnival drum,
dancing a dervish in the air’s freedom.
THE DOG DOES NOT ASK

The dog rips rainbows’
candy strings from clouds,
licks sawdust from the benches,
swallows a streetlamp’s blue fire
glowing like a star in his mouth.

Worms whittle through black earth
in an oily root forest,
crabs linger in tide pools
and snails sledding up the tulip’s wick
ooze melting odors the dog huffs.

The dog knows this world is rich enough for heaven
and chases toads and lightning bugs.

People bereft of joy always ask
what the dog does not ask.
The dog does not justify snowfall.
It falls, it falls.
EXUBERANCE IS BEAUTY

William Blake wrote. *The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.* I ran cross-country in high school, 5ks under 20 minutes when September 11th happened. I got drunk on for the first time dizzy on Dad’s bourbon, surfing the jazz of the air, riding blue notes of my being. Young and slim, I knew I’d never die, my heartbeat blooming like a star. I didn’t think my future yawned enormous as the open mouth of heaven; I knew it did. I’d find a career, move tanned and fit to California, prance molten joys in the sun.

Listening to the radio live in Miss Harvey’s English class, the second plane smashed the South Tower in a meatball of smoke but that was in New York, far from Texas where my brothers and I spent our whole lives. I didn’t think the US would fight a war lasting longer than a year when I knew it wouldn’t.

In third grade, my older brother looked like me while our art teacher thought I was him. Making our own magical kingdom, we reigned peacefully over stuffed animal subjects. One secret I didn’t tell: we’d run away together, build the same nation on this beetle-rich earth where all people would be kind, equal and free.

I graduated college while he priced items at Sears, I drank too much soda, became a plump scudding rat, lucky to run a 5k in 30 minutes
while my brother preferred hard drinks to soft drinks.
We forgot our Kingdom of Peace,
that *exuberance is beauty*.

When Mom called me
about my brother’s brain aneurism
I didn’t think he’d survive; I knew he would
but the blood vessel burst and the war
begun sixteen years ago still roiled
in Afghan dust and bones, I haven’t gone
to California while I wept at the funeral
not for the Eden that was, but will be.

His ashes descended below jade
April grass flashing from loam
that held humankind between heaven
and earth. One day I’ll build
the Kingdom my brother began.
*He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star.*

I confront murderers’ bloody hands
with my innocence, lullaby
the dead into flowers, knowing bones
grate to dust but childhood cannot die.
Now into my thirties, I’m still a boy,
*Energy is eternal delight*
and I will never surrender my joy.
HEART GHAZAL

In Las Vegas, the Heart Attack Grill clogs the heart. Patrons have died on site eating beyond their hearts’ capacity. Flatliner Fries, Quadruple Bypass burgers are orders. Like a veiny tomato, the heart thunders without the mind’s permission or desire to siphon blood. Like digestion or dreams, the heart beats involuntarily. Jon Basso, the owner said deaths on the premises help his business. Heart in ancient semantics relates to words core and creed—values frame this meaty blister. Aristotle thought the heart, not the brain, was the source of thinking. In the sea four feet wide and four hundred pounds, a blue whale’s heart pulses two to eight times per minute, its beat heard two miles away. A water flea’s heart jitters visible in its clear flesh under a microscope. Valentine’s Day arrows through hearts mean lovestruck. “I died for love” the last words croon from the song Butcher Boy and in life an impaled heart would surely kill. The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 stopped one hundred sixty-eight hearts and a picture made the papers of a fireman holding a dead baby, bloody as a ruptured heart.
FOR THE LAST LOBA

Fishnets fetter green sea turtles,
the last polar bear slips from ice floes,
a pounding rhinoceros gait
thuds to hornless tombs and the wolf limps
from a trap that took her foot.

The sun’s rind sinks crimson
on the Chihuahua and Sonora border,
day cloven into night as she rests
her muzzle above a city, wailing a duet
with the freight train’s plaintive vowel
grieving their passage to the abyss.

Wafting memories burn, chasing antelopes,
suckling pups, taking air
in her mouth, her tongue’s flag in the wind,
the loba scurries to the other world,
to know in her body without words
this world, the kingdom of beasts,
bright and snow-footed,
dashing against darkness like the sea.
AUGURIES OF EXTINCTION

The long-dead dodo haunts the poacher who thieves the fox. When toad brains scramble poisoned by herbicide, humans butt their heads to mad pulp against their dreams, men who cut trees for money buried in wooden caskets, bones of coalmining lobbyists converted to crude oil in a billion years.

From his grave, a General’s commands are muffled by a single flower.
ODE TO ANIMAL PENISES

Although I would rate
the tapir’s prehensile wang
enough for his mate,

the dork of the whale
triumphs serpentine boners
over all things male.

A sea barnacle
is small but his schlong outgrows
the penile carnival,

longer by eight times
the length of his body.
Cats, silent as mimes

possess spikey pricks
they plant in lovers as hard
as blood-drunk ticks.

A giant squid’s phallus
dangles eely in the dark
sea’s penis palace.
NAMING THE AMERICAN BEASTS

Adam cupped a narrowmouth toad
in hands oiled by prairie loam and named him

Narrowmouth Toad, chickadees he called
Snuggle Pandas. Wakan Tanka told him

not to christen bison while their scraggly clouds
hooved the booming plains. Their names

belong to their mothers, fathers
and calves bawling below heaven’s udder,

the Milky Way. The peccary he baptized
Gruntsnout and the Gila monster, Lavatooth

before the natives banished Adam
to South America where Cortez walked

gonging in steel and helped add
Spanish words to llamas, capybaras,

comet-long arapaima fish
in the Orinoco, poison frogs like blue fire,

tapirs dancing through green chapels of ferns.
After, they drank and raised a toast

to their “discoveries.” With all local words
replaced, they were free to varnish crowns

from Incan gold, blush Naples’
gardens with tomatoes, claim man’s dominion

over gulls and bitterns
and erase the world with their tongues.
EPITAPH

Let June bug wings strum bluestem stalks
like harps to lullaby lidded eyes
of dreamers, gnats sing in the grass
so all life falls in love with life.
SOMEWHERE

whiskey stills on the moon,
a drunk astronaut. Somewhere
a clown is dreaming. Inchworms
tiptoe plums that bruise like fists
beating themselves purple.
Somewhere ghosts lick
the abandoned trolley, freight trains
smash through clots of gnats
frosting gutters. Somewhere
fish gills siphon in a well.
A child is born in 1748
somewhere no one remembers.
A novel burns unread at the hands
of a dictator. Cro-Magnons
paint caves before generations
forget their language. Somewhere
an undiscovered planet bears oceans
no traveler descends. Somewhere
a song is heard in a snail’s wet sound.
MOON MYTHS

Deity names, Luna, Selene, Gletis, Moon. Neither bright flesh nor luminous dairy, the moon’s igneous rock shines like dough. Astronomers think a planet hit Earth before life began and the moon broke off. In warm climates, the lunar goddess is female, in cold countries, a man in the moon.

Per the Norse, one wolf chases Máni across heaven, a second hunts his sister, the sun. A full moon’s phase is thick, others reaping crescents when stars glint like hot bees gummed in night’s molasses. Blue Moon, a jazzy ballad from Richard Rodgers croons doggish with lost romance found. Chanda Mama, Uncle Moon in Hindi is a folk song mothers coo to infants. Neil Armstrong walked and drank Tang on the moon weighing one sixth of his Earth self, leaping in love with the lamb-white, wedding dress basalt of the moon.
BREAD

Humps of wheat,
sloping loaves
changed to fish,
rye and oats,
civilization’s hunger—
bread rises into cities.
Winnowed stalks
heaped in bags packed thick
as rat bellies,
battered dough,
bran fermented
to leavened curves
like lobes of planets.
Gaseous yeast
brewed for biscuits,
for beer
russet in horns
or lustful goblets.
Chewy moons,
golden rolls—
grain broke wild loam,
ashen flour baked
to feed Sumer and Egypt,
God’s body,
rounded woman
o brown hills of taste.
DELICIOUS KINGDOM

Middle School. I ate Skittles off the ground melted on concrete, crushed by cars, the sweetness I loved tanged my flesh as if I mined candy from some sugar loamed ore. A boy gave me a lunch roll he rubbed in dirt and I chewed hungry to stain my tongue with toad sweat, dirt’s wisdom filling my mouth, blackberries’ balm slaughtered by birds, crabapples welded to soil’s cake batter rising all that we eat as dragonflies blend air with their wings, the sun’s honey rolling slow down my throat. When we die, a priest said, Heaven is a banquet for souls, but I think ghosts have clouds for teeth and all spirits have names and selves in paradise. Let me bust grapes like little zeppelins dappled with mist, carnal figs and lust for jackfruit. I will give my flesh to the world, abandon my name, and be free.
LOVE POEM TO BEAK

You claw the terrarium glass,
crack filters in impish
snapping turtle romping.
I love you Beak; you smash
fishbones to dust with jaws
like chomping anvils
that could break my hand
but I am the giver of food.
You are the gift of love.

Your algae-caked carapace is slick
as eels in their green runes,
not cold blooded, your flesh
warmed by sun and light
on your emerald smile.

Home from the Wildlife Center
and asleep we’ll dream
we’re swimming the moon’s white lakes,
so intimate when I sense
the bare earth of your body
you nip the clouds of my breath.

I wake when stars tinker blueberry flames.
Brewing coffee, I toast you
my lime-green love, my jade dinosaur
sleeping near the heater. Your closed eyes,
two onyx stones, will fracture into sight
when the sun seeps through them.

Night’s blackness cannot blot
the hope I’ll feed you come dawn
with minnows slammed into gum
by your crushing kiss.
SPRING PEEPER

Mid-March, slush gurgles in the pond’s throat. Tadpoles batter

through muck mulched with sticks rotten in slick worm-wealth,

last years’ flowers pulped into jelly, dead roots mixed

with earth guts. First frogs hatch from the lagoon’s

witching brew and bubble chins in omens of heat

and blooming, their chorus a herald of fire.
WILLIAM BLAKE

June bugs banged the porchlight
one Fourth of July as fireworks
blossomed like sunflowers weary of time.

Skunks gobbled garbage
on fetid Texas dirt
where armadillos burbled from earth.

I thought Hummers drove dark satanic mills
and Dubya’s evangelism:
one law for the lion and ox.

The demiurge permitted the Iraq war.
To keep my lamb-bleating innocence,
I wrote bad rhyming poetry

about polluted rivers, unrequited love
and holding onto childhood.
I’m still a boy and am wiser for it.

Downtown everybody listened
to Toby Keith country songs
about ‘Murica and watched

the empire’s explosions. I read
yellowed pages with black and white etchings.
A whippoorwill’s lonesome dirge crooned through night.
BUTTERFLY SESTINA

From Mexico’s oaken core, butterflies flit north to the Great Plains with their wings. Forged sulfur and blue from their pupae they’ve split apart in a secret blooming as they patter with petaled eruptions, they cross sunward in silent arias.

Their beating prayers ascend arias sung by the wind, orange mapwing butterflies, skippers, tiger swallowtails—eruptions made from the slender applause of wings bristling dandelion pollen, blooming out of boughs and twigs from their pupae, suckling nectar, birthed slick from pupae. They are love songs cast in green arias, erotic flakes quivering and blooming. Mariposa, papillon, butterfly— words on the tongue vulnerable as wings let loose into the sky’s blue eruption.

Dwindling from pesticide eruptions that murder bees and the pupae, they seem lost in a Puccini aria climbing mournful melodies with their wings towards their death like Madame Butterfly until the last of their kind wilts, blooming.

They fly in wet flames over fields blooming in poppies and wild carrots’ eruptions. Once dodos, and now monarch butterflies closing like clapping hands from the pupae, doom us with their extinction’s aria. Humanity grieves at skies without their wings
when only old nature can craft their wings
as girls plant milkweed at their graves, blooming.
A soprano descants an aria
at the funeral, thunder’s eruption
and rainfall over the casket’s pupa
to bury the last of the butterflies.

Small butterflies kissing grass with their wings
break from pupae in a wakeful blooming,
rainbow eruptions and notes of arias.
BLUE RIDGE BLUES

Lightning Tortoise Thomas plucked banjos and twanged guitars, mourning his Blue Ridge Mountain home where catfish drifted dead above the river like pale socks, their ghosted mouths puckered open as if to howl.

In Fort Worth he lived homeless near Magnolia Street, his fingers clustered across the strings in the picking style of Mississippi John Hurt and the voice of Lead Belly, warbled Goodnight Irene for hipsters tossing coins and bills. As he sang crickets stopped chirping, comets were summoned over boiling streetlamps and white moths dervished through the night air.

I remember, he said, when the world had a song. Everybody murdered the melody when people poisoned the singing birds. The last meadowlark fell like a star and we all kept breathing, unaware a person could breathe and still be dead.

Strip mines blasted the stones to dust for shedding the loam’s blood, the coal in machines coking human lungs. Appalachian bluesmen sleep below punctured earth on graveyard pillows, our null tongues forget sorrows sweet as strawberries, their songs’ perfume eddied in the wind.

I ask myself, why live?
There’s no reason to sing any more
than flowers have reason to bloom,
Earth doesn’t ask why she should spin,
butterflies patter their lapis wings,
a blue moon blazes in the birdless sky.
AMERICAN WHALE ROAD

1. De Profundis

Midnight. A boy wakes, walks
to the pier and looks seaward
over moon-lugged foam
where jellies drip below the ships
hauling butterfishes round as cakes.
He imagines seahorses
curtsying down coral stairs
as herring, hogfish and eel
wind through the brine.

Over the depths stars boil,
molten Antares, Vega’s blue candle.
Below, sharks rip and lunge
and a leviathan like a dark sun lurks,
sperm whales dive and snatch giant squid,
tubeworms and devilfish prowl
in nameless caves
and large eyes open.

This sea, *wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts*
and smoke-fouled air melts icecaps
sheeting beaches with stingrays.
Her storms tremble with slugs.
Lightning whelks suckle at beachcombers’ toes,
whales quake in whirlpools,

and the boy left for the prairie
and returns to Corpus Christi, now thirty
in his parents’ old house stirs
woken by a dream of whales. It’s evening
and laughing gulls shimmer over the tide.
Waves darken, ghost crabs gnash
yellow pincers and the moon scrolls
through heaven. He thinks of tsunamis
curling coasts with wet talons.
He asks, what becomes of the world
whose center is ruptured?
Fall turns to summer, winter to fall
and hurricanes smite landward.
He dreamt of a Whale God beyond
blackness hugely leafing unseen in the dark
and calling words that became a song.
The man remembers lyrics lost in sleep
and patches of sound woven
into meaning. He asks:

Where did I begin? Where do I end?
My origin and destination: the abyss.
2. And God Created Great Whales

In the Eocene, a hoofed creature
small as a greyhound wandered wetlands
and his descendants left for the sea.

From Pakicetus to Ambulocetus,
Oceania became their blue kingdom
as they grew larger.
Ondontocetes, the first fluked whale came
and cetaceans divided their tribes
from krill-filtering baleens
to toothed rippers, sperm whales, orcas.

They plunder fish where lobsters dance
across a shell-spangled bay, auger snails’
pink horns slide on jellying feet,
spirals creaming. The wine-dark sea
quavers with pleasure-drunk gray whales,
their bellies round with shrimp.

Mother humpbacks nurse calves
with heavy milk. They howl
like drowned wolves in the blue
and their vast hearts balloon
as a beluga glides by icebergs and sings.

Dolphins thread through crests
while the Whale God, untranslatable,
each red-fingered dawn lifts the sun
from the ocean and says,
I am the sea.
3. Ahab

The oil rig exploded,
gashed the sea-floor’s blood, fuel
in cars and planes that slicked albatross wings
clogged porpoises bubbled dead on waves
like grimy soaps; fishes wept
black tears, and crabs hardened into basalt.

Fresh forged harpoons, whittled on The Pequod
whetted the wind as the sails bloated
their triple-masted sacks, the ship heaving
towards the white whale god.

I am the Alpha and Omega,
the Whale God says. No one shall see the end
that closes the world or the last dawn
erupting over the sea.
I am beyond America,
larger than humankind.
4. Hades

The whaleroad’s end. Odysseus crossing River Oceanus, entered Hades’ house with rams and ewes as the dead misted forward, phantoms of white girdled brides and old men blind as coal. Tiresias said he’d return home. His crew would die, warning that the sun god’s cattle should stay unharmed, or day would not break on their long black ship.

Mountains knock glaciers to streams and floodplains lazy with gators, brown deltas to the sea and blackness beyond all moon and sun. Odysseus’ companions wait for their life-hungry master to join them below Poseidon’s brine with the Whale God, their voyage rounded not in Elysium, Tartarus, Dis or the Asphodel Meadows but a seabed so black only memory and whalesong filter through their minds.

They are dreaming now of wandering cliffs, bewitched islands, harp-tender mermaid voices in Odysseus’ ears, sweet white wine pressed from green beards of grapes, seals barking in a misted harbor and rose-fingered Dawn above their heads, not knowing the time of day or year where jellyfish drum their white ballet.
5. Sedna

Daughter of Anguta, the creator,  
Sedna was born so hungry  
she fought her parents who severed  
her fingers, tossed her from their kayak  
ono frosted brine and her fingers  
changed to seals and the great whales.

Ice-floes mix with beluga dreams,  
polar bears in their cream-hues and hunters  
on umiaks rummage for Sedna’s gifts—  
the Inuit sea goddess, Sassuma Arnnaa  
in Greenlandic, Mother of the Deep.

Her round face sleeps below fishheads, ruling  
Adlivun, the underworld where souls prepare  
for the Land of the Moon,  
their final heaven.

Ahab taught that the white Whale God  
was the mask to the beyond.  
Under the mask, the abyss  
monstered with crabs and a human face,  
ships hoarding more gifts  
than the sea caches. Glaciers  
thaw into lakes, fishless tides  
grinding over Galveston,  
Miami, New York, Sedna’s  
whale-fingers nibbled down to bone.
6. **Humpback**

Singing blues in the blue,
they whelp and hum, their upturned lips
wide as black rainbows
as they hover and jazz through the depths.

The man staring seaward, imagines
their symphony among shipwrecks
and thinks the humpbacks are angels
moaning serenades, pitching arias
within the waters. He asks,
What do their notes mean?

Maybe they sing the epic of animals
born to the ocean, evolved to land
and back to the sea. Perhaps
they cast love songs across darkness
or sing for no cause except their song.

Across a brine-soaked cosmos
where huge worms flutter through waves
and seaspiders wisp a bent dance,
humpback rhapsodists echo
through the barnacled-starry sea.
7. Narwhal

The lobster’s bone speech rattles
where crabs milk ice-caves for sea-crumbs,
northern lights crown sleeping seals
and plump blades of halibut
as narwhals’ unicorn heads wax
with winter-fat.

The man, in Corpus Christi, is far
from the cold. He imagines the sea
to Baffin Island and Nunavut
creaming snow,

I go dreamward to the moonwhite north
where the polestar pulls me.
_Narwhal_ and _glacial eelpout_
become words of spells.
Their names are poems, my tongue seeding
the cosmos with _tusk_ and _star_.
_Lumpsucker, flatfish_, nouns for wizards
waking Earth with magic.
My mind shapes wonder from immensity.
8. Wine and Dolphins

Pirates captured Bacchus, the wine god bearded in kingly robes as they sailed over the whelk-dripping sea to Asia and the pirates thought him wealthy. He told them, I am a rich man but my riches are not of this world.

The men laughed and Bacchus shaped a bear from nothing onto the ship, the crew leapt from their vessel in the wine-dark sea and transformed to dolphins curving the salt churn and shoals of waves where oysters forge nacreous globes with mother-of-pearl.

Let the ocean romp with cackling dolphins arched in crescent joys. Let the long dead pirates’ fingers transcend to finbones above the glitter of fishes and manta rays’ hungry wheels for the sea has no nation except the sea and no ruler save the Whale God, the dangle of shells forever.
9. In the Beginning

Earth boiled like a cauldron birthing iron, 
her womb smithing metals 
red and unwrought over sulfur plains. 
Raining, it would not stop 
as the world hissed and cooled, 
the low places made pregnant 
with water, Mother Oceania.

The spirit of the Whale God 
moved over the face of the waters, 
settling firmaments above the waves 
and dividing wetness from wetness. 
In the beginning whale song 
fleshed into fish was with the beginning 
before whales came to be.

In the voided beginning 
coasts stood bare as slate 
before the Ordovician 
when mosses slicked seastacks 
to greening continents.

Devonian waves deluged ammonites 
and trilobites, chests of tetrapods 
ballooned the first lungs, breaths tasting 
the air’s invisible gift 
unknown to submerged dingles of eels.

All hoofed, feathered, bipedal beasts 
carry within themselves the moisture 
of Mother Oceania’s depths, the salt 
shivering in ferns and flowers.
The man staring at the Gulf says,
My veins are effluents from the sea
milked with brine-sown blood.
I came from depths and to the depths
I will return where the Whale God
rolls like a planet through the dark.
I will become the abyss, my mother.
10. Jonah

Blessed are snails purpling coasts
in poison cones, blue-ringd octopi
with venomous teeth where man o’ war
bubble and pop, merciful
compared to people tugging porpoises
from the blue with fishnets, oilrigs,
tuna raiders, seal clubbers
and trash vomiters clogging depths.

Those who laugh at The Whale God
will weep inside his belly.

Deliver us from the deep, O Whale God,
Floridians say, our peninsula soaks
with dread, this melting world knocked
from her orbit. Hurricanes churn
the sea’s guts onto the streets. Lord,
we are children lost in our own void.
We are children of the sea, burning.
11. The Whaleroad

The man stares seaward until the suns crisps
over the Gulf. Far off in waters
leviathans loiter, giant squid
open dish-large eyes unaware of birds,
the megamouth shark
sleeps on the black seabed,
tunicates waver like clear flames
in the whaleroad’s kingdom.

I become something immense
the man says, something beyond my body
as jellyfish climb submerged mountain stairs.
What blazes the zooplankton’s lights
burns in my bones, my marrow hot
with the Whale God’s song
beyond meaning into being.

I carry the ocean landward,
the poem made flesh. Words mean nothing
unless written in sperm or blood.
Language must be the salt
of justice brined in the deep
crying multitudinous greens
against the murder of the world.

The man remembers leaving Corpus Christi
for the prairie and employment
while the Whale God tells him
the rich become poor, treasure
chests break to silt, huge worms
bore through shipwrecks, America falls
and the whaleroad rises. He knows
to become a monk of the depths
that begat him and every creeping
being that moves on the earth,
to live for others, for the holiness
of every worm.

Sea spray peppers his lips,
earless lizards huddle in sand caves
inherit Earth, the one poem weaves rainbows
furnishing songs into crab innards,
a tide-dragging moon, naked lovers
taste each other in beach-houses
and long eels lick reefs
in the ocean’s undraining depth
that belongs to the Whale God
though fishnets chain the ocean, we smear
the wave’s lash with oil.

Let our words sting like jellies
on the harpooner’s wrist.
Let poems burn
volcanic islands in their wake.
The Whale God thunders justice from abyss.
THE ANIMAL SERMON

— A Texas priest gives his final sermon

Fellow parishioners,
we gather between the sparrow and the worm
where cherry-tender slugs
gnaw moss at the sty, God’s Word
oinked with the beginning from pigs:
the world’s revelation. Nothing’s profane,
only the sacred is here and its desecration—
smokestacks tongue the firmament,
oilfields bleed Mother Dirt
blessed among women and the fruits of her womb,
armadillos on coastal plains, bears in Big Bend.

We’ve no right to live
on Earth lit by foxes
when the last iceberg chips seaward,
the world floods again
and the Leviathan’s mammoth heart billows
justice. June bugs and prairie dogs, our neighbors
birth from Mary’s beastful uterus.
Animal joy is rebellion
against factory farms,
love: resistance from despair,

moon-yellow cocoons rise
silk moths naked as Eve, wingbeats’ odor
spices wind, the Word made flesh,
when litters of shoats slip from sows’
resurrection. My congregants are fish, amphibian,
dinosaur, insectivore, our doors
open to dung beetles.
The star-bright snail lips herbage
fronding Hosannas of aphids. The cross
is shaped from trees bearing rattlesnakes
martyred in Sweetwater each year,
cattle driven downtown Fort Worth
lowing for freedom breaking barbed wire open
to promised pastures. Let the fields sing

with feasting and sex, render unto the world
what belongs to world and God’s
hoghouse of mud-danced hooves, hot snouts
happy in haystacks. Near Quanah
churches greater than ours stir
peopled by red harvester ants—the horned lizard
eats them in the sacred round of hunger,
hill country stags mounting does are popes
spilling sperm like blessings, an aspergillum penis
conceiving a fawn savior. Gentle worshipers,

birth in yourselves a second childhood
as gnat larvae forge wings into singing.
Earth like a sapphire flea hurtles
through colossal galactic darkness
without angels to save us from ourselves.
This rolling globe is holy ground.
ANT FARM

The hog-round sun bulged when I woke at age seven. I caught sugar ants to tunnel caves visible through plastic. Anoles on the fence I thought knew my name, barred owls priesting on the oak. One by one those peppering creepers cringed hugging themselves stale as stone.

Did the colonies grieve their silent keys who clinked the loam? An ant survived. I freed her and her black feet needled home.
POEM TO MY CHILDHOOD

The maternal humpback waves her ragged fin
goodbye, blue squid drift in jelly dreams,
eels wag like tails, the sun globes
over laughing gulls and we squeal
hoofing the sea as marlins smile.

Friend, we will cocoon ourselves
into beasthood and become two javelinas
snout-snorkeling across oceans
clustered with snails.

Grunt with me in the warmth
of truffle islands, the toucan’s
banana beak. Let hippos unhinge
jaws to swallow adulthood
forever. Our presence erupts with newts
in oinking heaven.

Growing, I find that Earth
is not the best possible world
when polar bears shipwreck to seafloor vents
and molten crabs loiter.

While the ground and the ocean burns,
I’m with you, dancing.
There is no death, only you
my wumpus bear, abundant in toads,
your wool-plush breath so close
I have never left you.
ELECTRIC NECTAR

The subway moled through wormless steel tunnels
before I minded the gap to Kensington
then walked in Hyde Park where mute swans
boated on the Serpentine
arching their candle-slim necks
towards white fires of their plumage
and I strolled to the Natural History Museum
seeing the life-sized blue whale sculpture
loading space with his azure blimp
and baleen smile and dark eyes pocked
in his huge hull and after animatronic
dinosaurs I bought a bagel for 60 p
at a Tesco while a homeless man
conducted constellation symphonies
trumpeting across the universe and I saw
a woman in a full black burka talking
to her cell striding across London Bridge
over ships glittering on the snail-brown Thames
as I remembered a line from Wordsworth
The river glideth at his own sweet will
and seagulls chafed the wind so bright they burned
beyond passing strangers clustered like butterflies
churned by the London Eye for a fragment
of history erased by the sea
without wanting more than Earth’s electric nectar
and people became rioting angels
while the world spun through magic
I ate the air.
SECOND EARTH

The white owl is death. He carries the beloved to an infinite meadow. Grandpa, brother are you there?

As a child, my mother’s hair fell over her shoulders like black rain as she hugged me coming home from school. Dreaming, I still see her before chemo cracked the corners of her mouth, cobwebbed her face gray.

I see her lips red under the sun’s apple, her forehead’s moonlight. Midges spool faint clouds with the specks of their wings, their lifespans three to five days. I hope a second Earth contains them and all extinct dinosaurs, dodos, fishes and newts. I’ve become a bloom-maddened bee sipping sad flowers, craving the hot nectar of sorrow. My dog and all those I never knew ride the lunar owl’s nimbus carried to a warm savanna where my mother waits in the sea of grass with open arms and her hair smells like grief.
WHERE CHIPMUNKS SLEEP IN WINTER

Central Iowa, gales ping icicles
over plains bare as a white ogress.
Hungry for fire, I’m lonely for Spring.

Little bluestem won’t scratch the air
with the jade hair of troll dolls before slush
foams in May. Cornfields sag in snow-weight

and I can’t find a single chipmunk.
Maybe they hibernate on acorn beds
until frog chins bubble from stock tanks.

Bovine snow plows grunt and lock horns
with curbs, cars cough like old men waking.
I don’t know if this world endures

the last honeybee’s death. Earth spins
off-center and can’t regain her balance.
If black-footed ferrets go extinct

what right do my brothers and sisters
have to drive over their bones?
I walk through white prairies wounded

among ghosts, mastodons galloping
shaggy pavanes, huge ground sloths
clawing the creaming wind.
A FRIENDSHIP ATLAS

1.
I dreamed of a flounder the hue of love
rainbowed to me on a wave.
The saucer-round fish spoke on the shore:

When you wake, don’t drown ants
for pleasure with the hose. They are
your children. Sing my song
in eelgrass dunes where crabs like molten stones
tiptoe their hot ballet.
Don’t despair for the dodo,
Sumatran rhinos, for all deaths.
Dying is a dance to be mastered.
There’s no hell, paradise
the kindness of dogs.
Seed the world with love,
insane, unmannered love.

Waking, I walked outside to the hose,
put my hand on the knob.
Remembering the dream, I removed
my grip, entered the house for Pop-Tarts
and returned to the yard and crumbled
my breakfast on ant mounds
peopling summer without sound.

O my children.

2.
My mom was mentally ill, a best friend said
whipping my ear with her breath
on the phone. I will report to the police
the next suicidal statement you make
It scared me you looked like
my mother in your meltdown.
Bipolar people fuck me up!

On the other side of the phone, her hair
dropped like heavy rainforest ferns
before cancer bared her head.
After, she never spoke to me.
I’m glad she had support
fighting her disease. Mine was too scary.

I want to be her friend, again.

3.
Grandpa’s neighbors in the country
had ox-long petroleum tanks,
burned trash in barrels beneath starlight
as the moon floated through their pastures.

I walked to barbed wire a brown mare
muzzled over and I grieved
for my former friend, still alive
and forgetting me slowly
as icebergs flaking from polar caps.

I handed the mare an apple.
No wind stirred the grass, no one there,
I heard her heartbeat ballooning

and in the horse’s black eyes I saw the fish saying,

No one is lonely
when moles blunt claws with mud, the song
of dirt’s flesh. The world
and the ants have not forgotten
your friendship. The ground sings
the thunder of worms,
the sky blasting birds
into the forever which is now.

I wait to walk hand in fin
and we’ll dance together
like lunatic fireflies

holding onto their light.
WAYNE LAPIERRE

Thumbing Hail Marys on his own airstrip,
his rosary beads are high caliber lead.
Fondling an AK’s scimitar-curved clip,
he’s thankful Vietnam veterans bled
during patriotic service he skipped
and he grows richer when children are dead.
METEMPSYCHOSIS

I met him psychosis-driven
at track practice, screaming
Run faster or I’ll kill you!

In high school, I ran the mile, two miles
and eight hundred meters. One practice
he shouted I will fucking destroy you
and after you die you’ll be my bitches in hell
as the team circled the red dusted oval
and he stood browed from sun with his chest hair like smoke
from his open shirt.

I sped up and outpaced the front pack
for the first time and thought I could beat
the varsity runners. I was thirty meters
from the finish, birdsong gonged from distant pastures
to my ears, gravity reversed.
As I fell upwards towards the sky’s blue lava
I entered the orbit of eternal spheres.
Jupiter’s globe broiled like thick clouds of honey,
Saturn’s rings sliced through black night
in halos of pearl as I came farther
than the first suns over the Milky Way’s
swan-curves beyond where I found
billions of galaxies and worlds stirring
with alien life while I fell inside the bodies
of strange beings. Returning earthward
I became a lioness in golden Africa,
a humpbacked whale in purple depths
of the sea and my spirit entered
a worm toiling through dirt before I opened
my eyes and the team stood around, staring.
A week later, Coach Jackson got fired for threatening to strangle the principal but I never forgot the day my ghost thundered with infinite God.
FETUS FAJITAS

Eating babies is immoral
unless they’re shipped to the third world

where spindly men lay starved on cots.
Let the poor eat toddler tater tots!

said Marie Antoinette who thought real men
chose cannibalism, not Tofurkey when

it wasn’t entirely Vegan
while boy scouts were cooked by Ronald Reagan,

Wyatt Earp, famous western cop
ate huevos rancheros and child chops

and the all-American John Wayne
dropped A1 sauce on infant brains.

Stranded plane crash survivors swore
they’d never smolder newborn S’mores

on their fire, but they did. A few
frat bros grilled kids on the Barb-B-Que.

The Office of Student Conduct dismissed
their defense they read Jonathan Swift

for freshman comp, though they ate hardy
dining like the Donner Party.
FLY LANGUAGE

Jazzing heat with wings,
they smudge rooms and rub
pinprick hands in washing prayer.
Humans swat the gadding specks
to kill flies but they live on
in maggots like blisters
chewing guts of a dead rat.
Bottle, fruit and horse flies
glimmer emerald, ruby
or onyx-black, the air’s jewelry.
The faint tasers of their voices
sing epics no one’s translated.
EROTIC SLUGS

Globs of butter, wet goblins, they rub
mouths lubed on blue lichen,
bellies grinding slow rivers
over humid mud, glugging air,
slugs measured in slimy lust
for dew, hedonist pleasure-monks,
paths slick with carnal lard, joy swelled
in oily organs, jellying hearts
gorged on Earth’s heaping gift.
EUPHORIC LEMON SHARK

The sun bloats like an engorged heart over the mangrove bay. I need nothing except my bones and the world. My flesh has no borders

as I feel my human lips dissolve to rows of triangular teeth, my face oblong underwater and hands and feet change to fins.

I become a lemon shark nosing for snappers, alive and naked. I glide through depths as through a womb, chew sunlight

filling my mouth with wet fire. I hear blueness, cartilage tender and newborn, my body singing its sweet poem made of being.
ANIMAL NOISES

An oink! A palpable oink!
people say hearing dawn-pink pigs.

Though the walrus’ glottal belch
is garbaged with fish-rot, we love

wolf-diphthongs across the stars.
Children learn all phonemes

from their parents’ speech whipping tongues
of air into words—language,

the semantics of animal noises.
*TaH pagh taHbe’—to be or not to be

in Klingon sounds like alligator talk
while humans teach parrots to say *fuck it.*

Cows bellow bass notes to the wind
we assume are not words, cooing owls

and the cougar’s screech phrased
in the plum-sweet dark. Maybe the squirrel

chirping at the man who gathers
the morning paper, calls his name.
LAST WISHES

Go outside. Laugh at airplanes chewing clouds, feed horses planetary apples, lick the air and taste all remaining light. Be happy as a dachshund diving in a bed of biscuits.


Bleat in butterfly-thundering fields. Dance at my funeral. Every ant scuttling on a stick, every man and woman who lived and loved, boys chasing toads in a park, strangers brushing shoulders on crowded New York sidewalks, every truck driver on I-35, every sparrow and human being die buried by the living who also perish, alone as Earth’s stone rolling through space. Time eats everybody and a child eats time.

Find my innocence in a garden slug like a glacier galloping sunward.
LULLABY

May the north star guide your sleep
my arctic friends. The little dipper
jingles snowy bells while fox

feasts through frost for goose eggs.
Narwhal, you lit the sea with your candling tusk
when starfish suckled the last icebergs

on our warming planet. My love,
the famished polar bear, swam
for the moon’s bone wrapped in blubber.

Oilfields drank glaciers, Icelandic poppies
fireworked the tundra, though we sleep
thousands of miles apart—

we’ll play in our dreams, waking
to nibble the sun, greasing
light’s honey over our smiles.
DEAR AMERICA

tell me with a train’s grief howling
through the Dakotas and Wyoming do elks’
hot meated hearts beat without knowing
meadows are rimmed with tar sands?
Are your amber waves of grain tilled to cornfields
bleeding fructose? America
have you ever had a dream worth pursuing?

The midge’s wings whirr April into song
wolf heels walk like moss until the last glacier
greases into slush. Can moths
sow justice with wings riddled fresh from cocoons
their innocence taught to you
or do we bomb enemies until fire springs
from foreign children’s eyes? I waved your flag
each Fourth of July saluted vets though none
of your wars were worth fighting. Your land
does not belong to you your destiny
made manifest by skulls of your victims.
Become spider-tender not volcanic
with tribal rage prodigal son
of Europe empire of boorish patriots.

My friend my maternal earth I believe
your vision that all are equal. You do not.
Dear America lull me to sleep
with frogs’ plump apples their green songs
throat-pulsed to the moon. Kiss me
one last time. I no longer love you.
WHALE FULL OF GRACE

"It was full of plastic—nothing but nonstop plastic," he said. "It was compact to the point that its stomach was literally as hard as a baseball."

—Darrell Blatchey, Marine biologist, as reported on NPR about the contents of a dead whale’s stomach

Rasping blood, his tongue
redden brine with grief—the whale’s belly,
a black garden of pleasure
isn’t hell. We brought hell inside him.

His huge heart’s piping gourd
tapered still, slow warbles
washed from his crimson throat.
We, his murderers, mourn
for the deep bullet, dark loaf
of the sea, his stomach crammed
with 88 pounds of grocery sacks,
rice bags, the floating thunder
of waste in time, consumes us.

When oil creams from sliced tankers,
tides reeking fishbones roll
hurricanes on city coasts,
we, Ahab-mad apes, learn the ocean
is not an object but a covenant.

The world, like the whale, stops breathing
one day, humanity condemned
to the same extinction of all species.
Schoolyard winds won’t heave
child’s laughter, our kisses rancid
in bitter clay, our lips
shut under brown and sour grass.

The whale and the world must be loved
like a mother to her newborn
resurrecting meaning from the dead
if Earth’s blue turning can sing.
WEST OF HAPPINESS

Cruising west on Interstate 20
past Abilene’s cattle and mesquite,

the hoof-forged plains, pumpjacks
dipping like steel herons for drinks of oil

in prairie dog towns nameless under stars,
the Milky Way’s belt boiling planets—

I join New Mexico’s adobe cantinas
where ranchers down mescal, yucca-wreathed mountains

smoldered by dawn and realize no wilderness
exists save what is inside me

and if happiness escapes,
I have escaped happiness. Over hills

green saguaro arms praising rain
are crowned by molten flowers. I reach Yuma

and refuel, buy an energy drink
knowing Earth is not my possession

as jackrabbits listen to my heartbeat
rustle blood through my veins, the moon on my breath.

Arriving at the Pacific pluming squid
I taste sea spray that is not mine.

Traveling westward roads pilgrims crossed before
I see wounded multitudes desperate
to remake Eden, for Los Angeles
sunsets drowning seaward to be theirs.

I have destroyed manifest destiny
and did not realize I became so tender

and radiant to my grieving brothers,
my sisters. The universe is beautiful.