

ANATOMY OF EMPATHY

For seven long years in South Korea,
at Yongin's Everland Zoo, Koshik lived alone—
another victim of human acquisitiveness.

They say* this Asian elephant
construed a way of speaking
the language of his keepers

by sticking his trunk into his mouth
and tongue-shaping plosive trumpetings
into intelligible Korean words.

If this does not stir your heart
to compassion, nothing will.
Have you heard of Julius,

living in Lindner's sanctuary
for homeless parrots**—afraid
of the others because he doesn't think

he is one? If only his owner had tried
to be nature instead of mere man.
If he instead had entered the terrain

of Julius' ancestral domain without
disturbing the grass. Treat each parrot,
each elephant as highly intelligent,

sacred gift from the Creator.
Look into the eyes of one terrorized
by bullhook and electric prod.

See the light of God brimming
from her soul. Enter the mosque,
the temple, the cathedral. Feel

beheld and uplifted by just one elephant,
parrot—you'll never be the same.
Is it too late for me to change

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professions? Study anthrozoology,
comfort, soothe, smooth out ruffled
feathers, remove the harness and chains,

apply the salve to hides rubbed raw,
to puncture wounds and lacerations,
share their pain of separation, torn from

clan and native land. I would give them
back their roiling creeks, swaying grasses,
damp woods, real tree branches

in place of artificial perching posts.
To hold in my palm or arms
the old and transcendent

out of their element—each of us
moving the other beyond
the aftermath of trauma.

*Current Biology Journal

**Serenity Park, Los Angeles, CA

Previously published in *Pigeon*, Sybil Press, 2018.

BLACKBIRDS FALLING FROM THE SKY

Blackbirds are falling from the sky,
foaming at their mouths,
and you ask me why
disturbed nature has
unnerved me?

Process physics,
mathematics' chaos theory
reflecting the world –
ecological and weather patterns
governed by nonlinear chaos.

Flapping wings of the butterfly
in Mexico causing air currents to
amplify over San Francisco.
Forget the Brazilian rainforest,
the greenhouse effect. Forget

global apocalypse – concepts too
quotidian now. Blackbirds falling
at your feet. Time to break free
of compassion fatigue, tackle
the politics of environment,

reread Virgil's *Eclogues* and
Shelley's *Epipsychedion*, lament
the loss of landscapes, species,
innocence and wonder.
Time for anger,

contemplation,
disquiet as you sense
your separateness,
sin of trespassing though you
tread as softly as you can.

A mix of exaltation and grief
hits you head on as you observe
nature, every creature – save
yourself – connected.
Arrogance, ignorance, greed –

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BLACKBIRDS FALLING FROM THE SKY, page 2, new stanza

look how they all lead straight
into polluted waters, despoiled
forests, eroded poisoned soil,
disappeared species. Not even
hanging upside down on a wall

performing prayers and self-
flagellations forty days can save us.
Excluding ourselves from Earth's time-
space continuum, we've become
slow, impervious, dull.

Grant us, Creator of all,
a vision of the universe's
sacredness. Sunflowers,
turn your faces from sun
to blackbirds falling from sky.

Scatter your seeds
among bodies, diseased,
as they fall and die
on desecrated,
holy ground.

Previously published in Diana Woodcock's third poetry collection, *Tread Softly* (FutureCycle Press, 2018).

DUGONG

The problem with marine biologists,
she complains after the lecture
as we walk to the car to drive home
through congested city streets,
is they believe the world revolves
around whatever species they've chosen
for their life work. In the long run,
does it really matter, she asks,
whether or not we save the dugong
and manatee? Won't the world go on
just fine without them?

The secret of marine biologists,
I explain as we sit seemingly forever
in a traffic jam, is they've observed
how the world revolves around another
species till they've been knocked off-center
and are happy now just being one of many
kinds of entities on the third of nine
planets revolving around an ordinary sun.

Silent sirenian sea cow, content
all these seven and a half thousand years
to graze your flowering sea grasses
in mangrove channels and the lee sides
of inshore islands, you've persevered
as humans hunted you for meat and hides –
stealing even the tears from your eyes.

Do you ask too much now, shy legendary
mermaid, secretive in your sea grass meadows?
Just a few marine protected regions?

Let no more of your tears and semen
be stolen and sold as aphrodisiac.
May you be left alone in your Red Sea,
Arabian Gulf, off Africa's east coast,
Australia's north.

Shall I name you, every one,
Beautiful Mermaid?

Previously published in *Weatherings* (anthology), FutureCycle Press, 2015 (print and ebook edition). Also included in Diana Woodcock's second collection of poems, *Under the Spell of a Persian Nightingale* (Word Poetry/WordTech Communications, 2015).

ELEGY FOR THE TIBETANS WHO CHOSE SELF-IMMOLATION

Nothing so noble,
so admirable as *the power*
of the powerless,
nothing so liberating
as *living in truth*.^{*}
To set oneself ablaze

is to break the chains,
grasp the glory of
transcendent power.
Sixty years of cultural genocide—
repressive rule,
deliberate subversion—

who wouldn't decide
to douse himself with kerosene,
light a match, make a scene
in the marketplace,
at a road crossing,
on a bridge?

One hundred and fifty-five
since 2008 choosing to self-immolate—
an act for Tibet's freedom
and happiness. How to keep
on the middle path between
the world's reality and vacuity?

This is about light and dark,
order and chaos,
yin and yang,
doing the noble
liberating thing when
the moment arrives.

*Vaclav Havel

Previously published (as a finalist for WaterWood Press's 2019 Carolyn Forche Prize) in
Elusions: Refugee Poems (an anthology), WaterWood Press, 2019.

HOW TO BE COURAGEOUSLY SIMPLE

Without courage, we can never attain to true simplicity.

--Thomas Merton

Whatever you do,
don't do what they expect you to do.
Consider the most rational,
practical, lucrative choice,
then shelve it—no, better,

throw it over the cliff.
When they warn,
Keep a stiff upper lip,
make a deliberate effort
to make yours quiver.

Whatever they expect you
to deliver, come through
with the opposite. When
they say run, sit. When they
advise, *Buy this and that*,

sell all you have and give to the poor.
You've heard this all before,
and though something about it
entices you, you cannot bring yourself
to do what would lead to a life

free of all their trappings.
What with all your mappings
of simplicity's routes, you've
given in to the deadly doubts.
But there's still time:

get out, get out!
Be courageous—
do the simply outrageous
that will shock them
and liberate you.

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KIN TO ALL OF NATURE

Surrounded by the grassy river, finally
becoming *plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark*,
I caught Walt Whitman's meaning.

Became a coral, a sponge at home on the hard
marine bottom, a succulent on a coastal prairie
beyond the mudflats. Became the tallest conifer
of a cypress dome, quite at home in standing water.

Became the twirled strangler fig on a gumbo limbo,
peeling bark the trunk curled back in protest,
acid from a decaying plant dissolving limestone
around a hardwood hammock, helping make the moat.

Became soil collecting in the jagged bedrock,
root of a slash pine taking its time breaking through
the crack, the outer bark of the pine scorched by fire
sweeping across a limestone ridge. Became one blade
of golden green sawgrass swaying as if praying for one
songbird to perch and sing its praises to sky and prairie.

Became the haven of shade in the hum
of the hammock, the five-lined teal-tailed skink
poised on the rail, listening and waiting.
Became the wide grassy river, wetness of summer,
seagrass sheltering shellfish. Became a coastal channel,
mangrove forest, stilt-like roots of one red mangrove.

Became marl sediment settled on the limestone
of a freshwater prairie, allowing slow seepage
of water. Became the deeper faster-flowing center
of that broad marshy river, panther prowling on
hidden hammocks through the night, thunder cloud
spilling out its blessing summer afternoons.

Became alligator sunning on Taylor Slough's bank,
pond apple plopping into the silently flowing,
rising river, zebra swallowtail dreaming
on the string lily, fanning my wings. Became water
defying human borders – vapor moving invisibly,
liquid percolating through peaty soil and marl.

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KIN TO ALL OF NATURE, page 2, new stanza

Became myself again as I once was
in the beginning – present to and kin to
all of nature.

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