

CLOSE FOCUS

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CLOSE FOCUS

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My poetry has appeared in NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW, GEORGIA REVIEW, NOTRE DAME REVIEW, THE FORMALIST and many others including THE PUSHCART PRIZE, 2001. I'm an award-winning photographer and painter and an amateur naturalist. Most of the poems in CLOSE FOCUS are new and unpublished. All are based on fact, including "Around Inuit Cookfires," which is derived from folklore, nevertheless true to natural wolf behavior. This is my first chapbook and I'm working on a first full-length book, a collection.

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CLOSE FOCUS

ELF OWL
(Micrathene whitneyi)

The saguaros lose weight and pleat
as they enter the death phase. It may last
for years. It's been so long since water
made good the sky's promises
there's a rattle in the desert's breath
not made by the sidewinder.

Leafless ocotillos, arcing across day's end,
dangle blips of red-- one-spark blossoms
like bobbing semaphores
signaling the elf owl to hunt.

In midnight sandshine, the tiny raptor
withdraws to its hollow
in the oldest saguaro. The cactus tightens
on its own tall thirst, narrowing its cells,
its clustered spines hard as medieval maces
guarding its deep secret moisture.

Twice more the pigmy predator haunts the night,
silence feathering swiftly over empty silence,
coming home empty.

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THE DISPOSSESSED
(Equus caballus, feral)

His gray-brown domain narrows with each mile.
His black tail swishes like ravelings
of raw silk. His soft nicker builds
to a snort raising small dust storms
around muzzles and hoofs. His herd
moves too slowly, heads bowed and bobbing
as he drives them to water
intended for cattle.

His tongue ripples hot scum on top
of his reflection. The mustang drinks quickly,
knowing he and his kind are not welcome.

Nervous as a sweat bee, he menaces the mares
with his teeth, tries to hurry them, nipping,
at necks, darting after his latest conquest
wandering wide and listless past the trough.

He smokes with black flies.
Snapping his mane, muscles shivering,
he tries to shake their torment off new wounds
crisscrossing old scars.

Apart, a rival sorrel watches
behind a creosote bush. nostrils flaring,
he knows about the dried blood
on the aging hide he races out to challenge.

Before last light drops below
the dust-deviled plains,
the young sorrel wears a redder shine on one flank.
But the mares, still indifferent, thirsty again,
are all his.

While another watching stallion waits.

NARRATIVE IN WHITE

Arctic people have hundreds of words for snow---
nuances of texture, depth, duration.

My middle America snow is deep chalk dust,
prairie pages of the she-wind's diary.
She doodles idly, sometimes erases her secrets,
terracing, pot-holing, building dunes.

An old metaphor, the snow as an open scroll
for a poet's musings. But this is not my tale.
A used quill lies on the river bank
where mallards write their journals
in precise graphics.
A raccoon's symmetrical syllables run bias
from pine margin to margin. Varied versions
of blue and gray underline each entry.

I trace fox printing half a mile. The fox
hunts and pecks, rhythmically punctuating
with his nose. The theme, ancient
as the mouse, is polished, proofed,
sentimental quotations deleted.

The next page bears elongated strokes,
emphatic periods of a cottontail.
Over here-- a sudden cursive shift,
then wider spaces between its dashes. I expect
the paragraph to be followed by the fox.

The plot changes. Hawk wings interject
a brief sweeping signature.
In an uneven indentation
the rabbit's sentence ends abruptly.

I retrace my rough scrawl
across February's broad shining sheets,
pondering how many small dramas my eyes missed.
Trying to recall the Inuit word for bloody snow.

THE WIDLING
(Felis concolor)

Men called him names he didn't know.
Tribal elders proclaimed him "Spirit
of the Canyons," secret as a Shoshone shaman,
going and coming like a dust devil. He watched
his world through smoky quartz: arcane fire
embered in his jewels studding quiet gold.

Down from the rimrocks he came, a warm shadow,
moving the same way lava once flowed,
remembering how obsidian cut his footpad
when he caught his first vole--- barely a chink
for the huge hunger hole he carried constantly
after his mother drove him from the cliff-hollow.

He missed his old home creviced by juniper roots,
screened with fallen limbs and acacia shoots.
It was there he cut his teeth, signed the bark
with budding claws, lost his dark spots somewhere
in twisted shade. In sight of his tree
he watched a sego lily grow tall as his eye
till his compulsion to taste it. He made toys
of pill bugs, learned how porcupine grass
tests an inquiring nose, learned the noise
of a diamondback, saw it strike his sister.

He missed his mother's tail tip signals.
Now he was more fur-sheathed power than she,
but new, unpracticed in the ways of jackrabbits
and solitude. Surrounded by drought, his gauntlet
was scorched arroyo, sanded playa,
ranchers' buckshot. Harried by emptiness,
he wandered past cholla and yucca, hurried
by scent-claims of his kind telling him to move on.

(cont.)

The chaparral rustled with deadness, no safe bed.
His nostrils began stinging with something unknown.
His eyes burned from an outside source. Ahead,
scrub oak and manzanita whistled in flames.
He zigzagged through curling brush and blowing ash.
A stone exploded, pelting his rump with shrapnel.

The swirling black ceiling broke. More water fell
than he had ever seen. A smoke-blinded quail darted
toward him. Rain washed feathers off his face.

Four more days a migrant, prodded
by noon-baked smells, moonflash of alien eyes.
He paused to take in the sweetness of sage,
the lowered stars, scurrying skinks
patterning the transient surface.
He caught a white-footed rat. It wasn't enough.

He entered ponderosa half-light, a half-tone
crouch crossing needles and centipedes,
past mariposa yellow and jabbering jays
that couldn't keep a secret. A coyote tucked
behind buckbrush saw the ancient rite of passage,
understood another role was being filled,
knew something would be spilled but never wasted.

All the hungry muscle meshed in ritual rhythm,
arched, elongated, aimed by his mother's tracings
on his brain. The mule deer felt nothing; shock
was swifter than fangs, a plot long perfected.

He was whole at last, auditions over, the part his.
He stretched, considered his stage: strangled shapes
of wood and jutting agate streaked with russet,
citron, mauve. He sat like cast bronze
on a carved plinth, watching twilight rise
from the low waiting places. High desert held
his triumph scream. Locoweed, beetles, the stream
struggling to skirt straggling trees and sand,
everything that curved around his sound,
was his.

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PHEASANT, HUNTED
(Phasianus colchicus)

Earlier,

I saw you settle-- blue and russet,
ruby haloed eye, white-collared as a CEO.
I watched you go down in a corn row mounded
with yesterday's rime, slurried, refrozen
pearlier
than the loose grained humidity falling now.

The dog's nose has discovered you. My eyes
have not. My boots are moments away as you wait,
melding
your camouflage with the surface you covet,
welding
your sweet meat to the ground.

Ours is an old pact. You provide food; I provide
feed and habitat. Now is a contest of waiting--
motionless mammal, motionless bird
rathering
to let the pointer's trained desperation
stand close enough to hear its heartbeat,
gathering
your feathered mulishness into perfection,
practicing every avian art but flight.

How do you know this dog will hold,
curbed
on this rung of feral urge to catch
and eat? How do you know this hunter will heed
protocol that calls for your being airborne?
My pattern of shot need only pelt the circle
beyond the canine's flawless freeze.
Loathing to fly, loving to run, yet you sit,
unperturbed,
personification of cocksure.

But your nerves at last become a lighted fuse.
Prepared or not, I always jump when you explode
from cover: Sudden propulsion, winged missile
whirring.

I mend my aim, can't lead you at this angle--
blurring
of collages, fragment thoughts, the atavistic
stirring
in my cells-- The edge of my sight catches
the quiver of dog jowls,
the splayed iridescence of tail sweep,
corn stubble jigging in bias light.

My burst of decision matches the bird's.

THE HURRICANE HUNTERS
(Equus caballus, feral)

No fresh mustang prints circle
the last cattle cistern; they're all headed
for the scrublands of badgers and bobcats.
Ole Hurricane knows he better get scarce
when ranchers rile up and load up.

Hate rides saddles bristling
with Winchesters and double-barrels
ready to make their point: Green plains
an' water are for cows, not to share
with what oughta be in dog food cans.
You hear me, Hurricane?
I'll find you, I'm ridin' your own kind.

Bane of us all, Satan's own mascot, I know
it was you an' your mares
that balded my best grassland. You
an' the always-trailin' herds of hunger
you prob'ly sired half of. Black
to the bone, scarred from years
of bein' sheik, I've seen you fight
for your harem, seen you beat out rivals
with a bulgy-eyed stare, a flip of ravelly mane.

I've seen you bare your teeth, shake
your head and whinny an equine damn and dare
that says no man can ride you, no rope
can hold you an' I believe you. But now
you got nine cowmen after your tail
besides me-- an' I've got an hour's head start.

Yeah, I see you yonder, Hurricane. Wind dervish
of the high plains, twelve mares rich.
My thunder is loud an' my aim is good.
That's right, swear at 'em, nip their rumps
an' move 'em out. Run 'em all day, run 'em fast.
I want you out there, wild-shiny like obsidian,
with hoofs as sharp, arrogant as the whine
of that last ricochet off the rocks. I want you
to hang on somewhere, Hurricane. While maybe
my uncertain kind learns better how to weigh
the balance of life and life.

ASSATEAGUE WILD
(Equis caballus, feral)

The moon quivers in shallow backwater,
wrinkled and shimmering like tie-dyed silk
by the crossing of a brindled mare.
She leaves the loose passel of ponies
with indifferent ears and languid tails,
moves toward a hump of beach carved by wind,
fringed with a mane of sea oats.
She pauses on its crest, poses farthest
from the new white-blazed leader
pounding after his wayward conquests.
He circles them tightly; the brindled mare
stays motionless, apart.
Suddenly his nostrils fill with her.
He swings his ebony head like a pendulum.

Watching from a hummock of salt-marsh grass,
the old deposed stallion backs his wounds
deeper into the night. The victor prances
forward, muscles undulating moonlight,
the flame on his forehead igniting flares
in his eyes. The mare turns away.

The flat surf is almost soundless
with the year's lowest tide. The dunes
ripple with shine and shape. The mare
snorts at a scuttling crab, an oblique shadow.
The stallion hurries to block her retreat.
He nickers, nips at a moon streak on her hip.

Claiming his right to her promises, throwing
his ardent cry to the bright blister in the sky
oozing light, he declares himself best
of his remnant kind-- covetous
of his last domain, their only home--
barrier island sand biased with silver.

AROUND INUIT COOKFIRES
(C. lupus tundrarum)

After we help with the umiaks, we hear his first notes far away, his icicle treble playing our spinal staffs, a different tone from the descant that follows.

The elders' eyes gleam from the depths of their carcajou hoods. They nod to each other, stare at the flames, and tell their visitors his story:

He was born on Denali's south slope, the headman begins, seventh and last and smallest. Fuming at the sudden draft fingering his rump. A writhing knot of hunger under his mother's tongue. His deliverer licked her sequels toward her crescent of warmth. He affixed himself, a furry leech, to flowing life till she shoveled him aside like a tuft of taiga moss.

His world was a vault in a rockslide. Weeks before, earth's entrails shuddered, killing his sire, maiming four of his mother's teats. Boulders of her new den meshed like wolf teeth, cavities packed with silt, sealed with lichens. From the moment he slid onto the granite, he was Denali's chosen.

The bitch mouthed him and found him lacking. She selected his siblings for her blessings, leaving the runt to shiver on the fringes of backpushing feet.

His head filled with his mountain: Folds and fissures impacted with azure, stretched to punch twin holes in the sky, letting blues and greys pour down the eskers, ripping sagging snow bags on their way out of the season, or slitting thin membranes bulging with contagious fog.

He dreamed the shapes and tastes of his mountain, felt himself running, wind singing in his ruff, heard himself threading his howls through green needles, saw his ubiquity rise to the timberline, to the Dall sheep pedestals, then flash down with the stoop of an eagle to overtake falling white.

His sovereignty was stoked with twilight-stalked prey,
even the moose was his. His tongue explored
where his fangs would be, he rehearsed his first bite
of flesh. His throat convulsed on the howl
he would throw to the moon he knew was waiting.
Waiting in the curled horn of a lame ram, waiting
on the tine of an old caribou, the winter hide of a hare.

He learned to move like a salmon
under the layer of rivals to steal a nipple, learned
it was more prudent to dislodge sleepers from below
than tumble off the squirming surface. And his mother
was slower to find him invested in small crevices
claiming another swallow of the dream.

He knew the dream was his only, knew he had emerged
from the cycle unsinkable as July sun. He would be
ruler of the loneliness, lord of the long dark,
honing what the mountain begot him. In time
he would join a pack, north-hearted,
moon-haired, gold-eyed as the aspens.

He would challenge the alpha male,
inhale his strength like a wisp of smoke
over lightning-bitten birch. He could feel
his victim quivering in the forceps
of his jaws, the hot blood one motion away.
He would diminish the pressure slowly,
allow the defeated to whine and drag the dirt
then sidle off to melt in stunted tundra shadows,
a shard of glacier broken off the whole.

And he, presiding legatee of Denali, would claim
the dominant female after the other members dubbed
his shoulders with loaded muzzles in tribute.
He would lead them steep, necks fletched
like arrows, eyes flashed with green aurora.
His fame would fly from black spruce spikes
to the pole; he would walk the red plush of heath
and ground dogwood, making way for the toklat grizzly
when he pleased to let the buffoon amuse him.

The dream idled while he applied each ounce of himself
swiveling his way to the lifestream. It flowed
thinner; he had to draw harder. Splinters of cold
jabbed his coat. Old habits stirred the mountain.

The last storyteller takes his turn; he rolls up
a mitten to show how small the needy sack of life
who must make his mother feel the dint of his destiny:

The she-wolf twitched in her sleep, woke
startled and pried her pup loose like a bur. Snarls
rolled round in the horn of her throat. It was she
he must master before he opened his eyes, dominated
his mates, before the hunt or the kill, the brute ice
or the trapper's tricks. Before the dream could be.

She rooted him from the pile, bore down, paused,
then snapped him up. Her breath was hard and wet;
she pivoted him on her sharp decision. Suddenly
she spat him out. Whimpering, she tried to back
from the den. Ears flat, she turned, aiming
her whiteness through the passage like a lance.

She was gone so long two pups died. The mountain
groaned, small spasms radiated through its gizzard.
The throb inside the apprentice legend wavered.
He attached his will to the stone.

At last she came back with an offering for him only,
his first meat, fuel for his fury.
He had won. He had made her taste the dream.

The old storytellers smile at our attentiveness.
A single wolf calls high beyond the fire fangs.
We count the cold bladed answers rising whitely.

ROMANCING THE HUMPBACKS IN RHYME ROYAL
(Megaptera novaeangliae)

The salty core of my Aquarian dream:
To slither like a seal through parting swarms
Of small day-feeding fishes; their bright stream
Defines our path until they plunge like storms
Of flying arrows, cross the scooping forms
Of undulating outriders-- our pair--
Pagliacci faces grinning us a dare.

The dream is real whenever we search here:
Increasing time each day the sea is home.
Our flanking porpoise escort pushes near,
Suspecting us for wetbacks, monochrome
Against a life-filled turquoise catacomb,
Who crossed their borders holding rigged passports
And alien marques to dabble in their sports.

Our bubble wake is coded melody;
Each globule rises to a treble staff
Of giant elkhorn branching like a tree.
Loose blue conveys whole notes, a sonic graph;
Our ears are tuned to each breath's epitaph.
High coral altars bless the tithes of sun
Along the reef-top posed as Helicon.

Ahead, my partner's outline forms the start
Of new collages, sudden sequin-flashed
With black-masked angels practicing their dart
And pivot, ballet-drilled, pink silver-slashed.
Poor Hemby can't perceive the treasures cached
Around us in the rhythmic rocking swells.
He suffers bends outside his scholar's cells.

He has no feel for magic strewn between
Prolonged depth rapture (my kind always lingers
On for days) and staid degrees in marine
Biology. The beauty slips his fingers
Like eels eluding grasp. His spinal tinglers
Misfire; articulation never fails
His wealth of facts. Yet he too dreams. Of whales.

(cont.)

And he who sees no shadings between peach
And tangerine, plies me with finest tools;
He hires my camera eye, takes pains to teach
Me what I need down here, precisely schools
Us to a peak-- aggressive, but not fools.
He's handed me a world, made us a team,
Refocused me on one enormous theme.

Each day our boat plows ripe Bahama blue,
Collecting dolphin dorsals in our froth-skids.
Like paired parentheses, they arch on cue
To rollercoast our bow-waves just like kids
In circus midways. Unimpressed with grids
And charts, they trail confetti-glitter high
And volley fragment suns into my eye.

In Caribbean moonwake overlying
Silver Navidad Banks, we hear them clicking,
Nattering and whistling, lustily trying
To fill our tape-- mimic Marconis tricking
Us all to their numbers, three or more sticking
Together, stirring up a hellish din.
Can these small whalekind talk with mammoth kin?

A sudden climax-- midnight fills with singing--
Humpbacks! Humpbacks tuning like a choir.
Choruses, solos, duets, the reef is ringing
With gargled chanteys climbing up our wire.
We roll their voices on our spools, require
A second playing to convince our ears:
They sound like pinched chain saws and friction gears.

II

For days we chase horizons in a bowl
And never see them. Goblets full of green
Keep overflowing heads of foam, then roll
And raise the brew-- now writhing serpentine
With shapes of life in skins of opaline.
Savant and poet stare off separately,
Each lost in his cetaceous fantasy.

Sea colors have a taste-- not rich as teal,
Less sweet than azure. Aubergine is flat.
Sun rakes a ray from underneath our keel
And shakes it like a flapping rubber mat.
Wind searches all our seams, a deft brickbat;
It steals our spit each time we try to lick
Our cracked lips, scours our sore eyes to the quick.

(cont.)

Behind my lids my data banks recall
Cetacea-- sub order--Mysticeti.
 Reposed on museum platforms near a wall,
 The dusty hulls of mounted monsters lie.
 Their eyes, suffused in facelessness, deny
 Ferocity. Their overwhelming length
 Would not let me imagine life and strength.

The eyes aren't made for Titans (theirs or mine).
 Baseball-size lenses stud a misplaced butte.
 I can't assimilate their odd design
 Or understand their roles. Can we compute
 Intelligence from sound? Can we refute
 Old whalers' tales of boats harrassed and followed
 By Jonah's curse, attacked and wholly swallowed?

As Hemby rubs his tiredness, mouth awtist,
 Like private involuted whelks we meet
 At interlocking jogs: Do they exist?
 And were they ever there? Has young conceit
 Propelled us, spending so much on defeat?
 Should we head home with time and money left
 Before this brine-bitch levies total theft?

The evening stirs its palette, bronze and puce.
 Then proof explodes the sea in flying shards
 As if Jehovah God would introduce
 A just-made creature launched on gold petards
 Against our gaze. Unearthly bulk bombards
 The amniotic fluid it returns to.
 Then sameness swears no shock took place. No clue.

Once more a continental plug breaks free
 From gravity, fast followed by another
 Full silhouette destroying simile.
 We reckon six besides a calf and mother.
 Again they shed one world into another.
 A final lunge-- downpouring shattered fire-drops
 Interspangled hotly with our heart-stops.

The lead bull takes my spirit, holds the leap
 Sharp at its peak, eternal in suspension,
 Indelible with what words fail to keep.
 Now nothing more can share this sealed dimension.
 We stand agape, our feet a lost extension.
 As all our whooping blows away astern,
 The after-images begin to burn.

(cont.)

III

They're back with dawn. We gear up for a dive.
 In saffron gauze they loll a mile off port.
 Our prying glasses see one more arrive.
 My tenseness quips: "Looks like they're holding court
 Or planning how to try us for some sport."
 My mentor grins, checking my hose and tanks.
 We row our dinghy closer to their ranks.

They're near the surface. Slowly we go down
 Through gilded glare, a curtain-rise of krill.
 Festoons of light define us yellow-brown.
La Mer, the mother of our lot, life's mill--
 We're back to ancient needs of fin and gill.
 A glimpse of flipper-white in this deep allness--
 Oh, Quasimodo-- please forgive our smallness!

If elephants are roots of heaven, whales
 Are roots of earth, embodied in eons
 Of sloughed-off metamorphic rock that sails
 Like airborne silk the inner echelons
 Of poles, their tails heraldic colophons.
 Fear has its moment. Yards away we yaw
 In their dynamics-- feeble, fragile straw.

Somehow their sound should be a hollow gonging,
 Vibrato thunder through sarcophagus dark.
 Or even low-note blues of bass sax longing
 With timbal beats to match the regal arc
 Of vertabrae between each piston spark.
 Four-octave ranges, shrill with reedy flaws,
 Compel us to pursue effect and cause.

They may sing higher, far above our ear;
 Sometimes they're racers' engines on a speedway.
 But now there's more than sound transmitted here--
 The water's charged with living interplay,
 Chain energy aplenty to relay
 A simple message, one we both receive:
Yes, you're accepted. No one has to leave.

I'm drowning in superlatives and verbs,
 My camera weighted down with disbelief.
 The nearest humpback glides toward me, but curbs
 Its thrust. Its hide hosts life in bas-relief--
 Such texture, form-- a frayed sargasso sheaf
 Trails down between us, stirs reality.
 My film must prove such animals can be.

(cont.)

I long to thank my partner for all this,
 Enhance his kind of ecstasy with mine,
 Repay him with the gold he'll always miss.
 I'd thread him through each metaphor, then line
 Him up with pulsing shade, wide-angled shine
 And ricochet, implant kaleidoscope
 Receptors in the center of his hope.

I see him thinking now: Why do they breach?
 Why do they roll and wave a flipper skywards,
 Pound the surface, curl their tails or beach?
 He'll drudge for each small truth, ignoring bywords.
 I wish him countermedly, not just my words.
 He figures weight by girth and length; he spooks
 A cow and swims too close to sweeping flukes.

The turbulence in-folds him like a pillbug.
 He unrolls, tries to glimpse the calf's baleen.
 But does he also see the flying prayer rug?
 The nephrite chinoiserie, the muraled screen?
 He labels, sorts, bypassing damascene,
 Chiaroscuro, Monet hues and light,
 The minor-key cantata I must write.

Beneath what genus does he classify
 Those mermen in the distance? How do they
 Fit food chains? Are they sailors' incubi?
 And the crowned one with the trident? I admit
 It's time to head for ship and shore, acquit
 My goggled eyes. Ascend is not the word--
 I'm higher now than any frigate bird.

As Hemby signals for a final shot
 My belly tightens; I move in and nod.
 He paces with a humpback, finds a spot.
 We're both encircled deep within the pod.
 He sidles closer. Touches! RIDES, wing-shod.
 They know he's there. They gentle their slip stream.
 They graze-- content to grace our living dream.

MAINE FLOOR

Garlands of ground pine decorate the aisles,
matching the Christmas zeal of city merchants
before Halloween. Puffs of minuscule spores
send seasonal smoke signals to customers
milling around upper and lower levels
of the woodland mall. New entries are tunneled
in haste. Fungi set up umbrella tables loaded
with snacks. Vivid hyperbole seduces consumers
browsing last year's litter and today's largess.
Wild blueberries and cranberries flash neon ads
for the long-awaited autumn rummage sale.

Ants of every persuasion
are the most numerous shoppers, beetles
the most selective, squirrels the hastiest.
But it's the bargain-hunting black bear,
indiscriminate grasping rude
who makes me abandon my squatting rights
of having spied the best wares first.

IN SEARCH OF MACDOUGALL'S DAHLIA
Southern Mexico
(D. macdougallii)

I read it in their eyes: "Senora Loco."
They recommended Juan who flew sightseers;
He might be willing to pursue my quest.

His open cockpit plane was old but sturdy,
His fee was less high-flown than most. He spoke
My language with a flair. We made a deal.

We winged above the Aztec canopy,
An undulating inland gulf of green.
Moist leaves refracted light like peridot.

He'd spotted orchids in the trees, but not
The flower I described, the specimen
I showed him in a dahlia genus book.

All afternoon we searched. At last Juan banked
For home. Sweet air consoled my cheeks, and I
Found solace in its blue taste on my lips.

Just then, a glimpse; low-angled rays glanced off
A different shape from flora we had seen.
"Out there!" I yelled and pointed east. Juan nodded.

He skimmed the myrtles raising dahlias high.
A spread of ivory cups with pointed petals
Hailed us, seemed delighted to be found.

Next day my pilot offered four-wheel drive
To weave our way through rugged plateau woods.
This unique dahlia is an epiphyte:

Discovered here in Mexico, at home
On middle elevations, rarest bloom
Of all, I longed to hold it in my hands.

Its woody stems, two inches thick, had grown
To forty feet in length, and snaked out yards
Of dangling skinny roots that touched the ground.

It perched atop a forest, borrowed limbs
To lift its salutations to the sun.
Its hosting trees supported wild ambitions.

My guide climbed, minus wings, to fetch my prize:
Two blossoms. Dahlia lovers understand
My joy. Enhanced with Kodacolor proof!

ELUSIVE LOTUS
(Nelumbo lutea)

Rarer each year like undisturbed water,
aloof and particular as behooves royalty,
a few still find seclusion
to push four feet above rounds of green
and warm reflection: Pedestals
for a visiting Kuan Yin, a Nile prince,
perfect for a posing frog who may
also be a prince. Lotuses
are the crown jewels of July.

Blossoming sometimes bigger than your head,
they bless selected lakes and ponds,
cupping sun around a gold dais, waiting
for another worshiper to step up
with apologetic offerings
of insufficient praise.

Earth's grounded flowers can't compete.
Other water lilies, too white, too small
and insecure to rise far above the surface,
float their briefness low among their leaves,
bobbing prettily, often leaving no will.

Long after the lotus chalice overflows
with Chickasaw moonlight, long after
spilling its legends, it covets its seed,
changes its gilded kiosk to green
to woody brown, and keeps its place.
Sunward it toasts nutty treasures
to ripeness, daily widening their berths.

When summer goes,
the lotus bows to its source, bends sharply
to pour itself back in chosen waters.
Remnant pods and pads make promises,
still asserting beauty in ripples of freeze.

SWAMP STANDARD TIME
(Ardea herodias)

Long-legged appetite in courting plumage,
still as the stylus on a sundial
the great blue heron presides
over his reflection in a circular pond.

Too far away, the Saturn rings
of his gilled bull's-eye rise
to the surface, spreading.
The heron's leg must not quiver.
He must let the fish come trusting
into the jurisdiction
of his spring-loaded waiting.
All the heron knows of speed is cocked
in the curve that propels his beak.

The feathered fishtrap fires and misses.
Slowly the bird moves his blue shadow
toward another quarter, reckoning the hours
in increments of hunger.

THE ARBITER

I killed it easily. It wasn't warm,
It wasn't beautiful or soft, its eyes
Held no appeal, this creature I despise.
Yet there's a strange perfection in its form--
I try to look more closely but a swarm
Of always-scouting scavengers, the flies,
Appears on cue whenever something dies.
I back off, mostly from my inner storm.

This animal was ordained at its birth,
Each cell a triumph, living as designed.
No one appointed me to judge the worth
Of miracles that reproduce their kind.
My flawed esthetics do not rule the earth.
Forgive me, our Creator, I was blind!

CANADA THISTLE
Cirsium arvense

Outlaw. Unwanted in 37 states.
I'd be abetting a fugitive if I let you
on my property. But here you're king
of the backroad. Tall, crowned
like your House of Stuart relative.
Flaunting it.

Last week you got in my blood.
My finger dripped into your own
reddish center so irresistible to bees
and wingless feasters
who must have climbed half an hour
to get there. None of your customers
seemed put off by my seasoning.

Today you are softer, more expansive.
A grounded nova, a slow-motion explosion
of stars. White dwarfs adrift, gleaming
rays bearing their motives aloft
for inches or miles. Orbiting
with their old designs on the dark heavens
of warm earth.

TO AN ORB WEAVER
(Argiope aurantia)

Wildness is not a lack of rules. Our roles
are merely different, yours ordained
by Athena, framed in geometric shimmer.

Your realm continues beyond my premises.
Your black and gold cloisonne sways
faint promises in music of an alien school.

Your net of notes only the sun knows how to play
stretches between minor keys, filling chords
not resolved by my harmonic scale.

High noon predator, I applaud your skill,
your patience, your choice of prey. My potions
will spare you to rid my garden of vegetarians.

But beware. The red-wing blackbird,
another player, another wild difference,
admires you without deference to beauty.

CAPTURING THE CAT

Spotless, stripeless, made for granite cleft
and scrub canyon, designed for quiet and quick
and gone: Felis concolor. Cat of one color.

By any name, he's hard to find. She's harder.
But if your backpack is light, and your step,
if westering luck is just so, and the wind,
your six senses strapped on its wake-- you may
see him. You won't forget a mountain lion's eyes.

Old ballads rhyme cougars with curses, panthers
with poison. Old timers call them "painters,"
claim they steal children, kill horses.
Cow country dogs and bullets set the meter,
human ears hear fragment facts, tall cat tales
steeped in myth. The fluent feline glance
encodes the sum, returns no trust,
no malice. A shrug of fact, a blink.

Now I'm the painter, searching my palette
for his only hue: Alloy of summer lightning
and raw gold. Topaz eyes cool-burning in beargrass.
Secret solitude matching puma shade and shape.

Caught in the act of leaping
the kindred sun between rocky rifts,
framed free on my sprocketed strip of truth,
he repeats his glory across my screen
while I stroke him, gild him to canvas

and pray it's not the only place he's saved.

DARK KINGDOM, UNIVERSAL REIGN

They surround us. Excrescences of patience,
lowest of the living: The fungi. Essentials
that neither flower nor fly. Bizarre buzzards
scavenging all realms. Picking up after men,
harvesting every loss.

Silent, unthanked, mostly unseen,
they return the salvage to needy Earth.
Spewing secret smoke, anointing everything
with clouds of spores, their truth threads
whitely through the nether beneath our steps.

Memory stirs with centuries of frowns,
the quick clutching of cloaks
encountering devil's bunions, devil's spit,
devil's cups on a woodland stroll.
Appearing overnight from nothingness,

such flora of canker and decay, men once said,
could have no root but hell. As we alter
surfaces, expand, our reparations never enough,
the fungi thrive-- limitless--
inventive to a fault. Aftermaths of falling.

Chins high, men move ahead, fastidious,
deluded, not knowing the future fails without
these agents of change, meters of larger time.
Some forms push tall, smelling of the grave;
a few tempt touch with orange, cerise, elf charm.

And some, posing benign, demure
as the serpent's proffered apple,
still invite any who will
to taste the legends. Some men do.
And sometimes-- some enter the kingdom early.

THE INTERLOPER
(Eichhornia crassipes)

Beneath inverted black fir jungle
of water hyacinth roots underweaving
my hidden bayou, my diver's lamp the only hold
with my world, I disturb a concert of stripes:
Hundreds of inch-long fishes silver-slanting
right or left as my hand directs. A king-size
mud cat like Genghis Khan eyes me
from the olive drab floor. And overhead--
my lost boat! Impounded since winter's big storm,
secreted under a broken cypress branch
and clamped listing in a wet/dry vise:
Sun-half of bulbous green vases
feigning innocence with flowers; night-half
of fringe entwining the propeller
upholstered in velvet. I rip away the slimy grip
and feel hairy stalactites creep closer,
determined as topside kudzu.
The gasoline-fed screw might thresh a few yards
before losing. An army of young trees
wades out to make a stockade. Roman-helmeted
herons patrol the spreading perimeter above,
weapons spring-loaded, lances plunging.
The mighty Khan rules here, phalanxed
by armored turtles. And I, lingering nakedly,
slave to light and lungs, must fight myself free.

CAMERAMAN
(Gorgon taurinus)

High speed shutter at f/11: his field
the depth of equatorial heat,
his filter peeling layers of indifference
off colors, clarifying the day's deviant slant,

incising the tidal wave of wildebeest
numbing all sense of numbers, hoofs pounding
the Serengeti Plains to linear levels
of levitating dust, different densities of sound.

His telephoto lens leaps the river, not losing
the albino calf or the lame mother swimming
back to search the chaos for her offspring
looking for her on the far bank.

Overhead, chaos freezes into still life--
thorn trees blooming with hunched vultures.
Below, stilled lives pile on a sand bar
slicing the downstream current.
A wide-angle, last frame view of Africa.

Across the world, Bangkok to Bangor, mangrove
to man, all things breathing press their images
in his dark boxes, stowaway in the right and left
privacies of his brain: each a twin lens reflex.

All part of the great bellows
of transmigration from holy dust to dust:
Exposures of time and place, revelations of above
and beneath. Multiple versions of light and dark.

TIGER, TIGER
(Felis tigris)

In forest night or jungle bas-relief
Of cross-hatched trails and trees designed to hide
His prowling stripes, he's only good for brief
Ignitions, not a steady burning. Pride
Or hunger kindles flare-ups. Ember-eyed,
The hunter oversees his solitude
In perfect cat contentment, justified
In beauty, his allotted interlude.

Between his birth and death lies little grief
Except a belly now and then denied.
He soaks himself out on a river reef
Of quartz awash with monsoon's muddy tide.
He contemplates his sambar kill astride
A log. He hones his claws; his marks exude
Wood spice. He sniffs and licks, rolls on his side
In beauty, his allotted interlude.

Chin whiskers haughty as a Bengal chief,
He leaps upstream, a wet sunrise allied
With lightning more than fire, a dazzling sheaf
Of regal shoulder muscle flexed and plied.
His meal is hidden where his last deer died;
He rasps his tongue across his favorite food.
He stokes his furnace, stretches, wanders wide
In beauty, his allotted interlude.

He seeks cool covert water. Herons chide
His lazy stare. A shelduck guards her brood;
He flickers past. His days and nights divide
In beauty his allotted interlude.

LIONESS
(Felis leo)

Your mate abdicates the role. You rule.
You don't need that paling tan
pooling with shade in the high brush.
Nor against sunburned veldt gnawed bald.
You could pose bold as bird scarlet
in any clearing; you could pause
at the water hole to cool bright insolence
glowing orange as monarch wings.
Your span doesn't spin on daily choices
between locusts in the nerve center
and grassfire in the throat,
doesn't wheel on trembling limbs
supporting fear and thirst.

You don't need camouflage to raid the night,
parting zebra stripes, stropping your fangs
on kudu bone. You are Artemis,
bane of the grazers, eyes like arrows,
an exercise in dominion for your subjects
never to forget their ranks in the realm.
Your coat of arms should iridesce
with pride colors; royal blue, gold, purple
should radiate rampant where you preyed.

And when at last you lie down with the lamb,
do it in spectral splendor.

CHEETAH IN A ZOOM LENS
(Acinonyx jubatus)

She ambles past her grazing nervous prey,
Dark-spotted hunger, simile for speed:
A chase machine, a disappearing breed.
Blonde head aloof, she idles, seems to pay
No heed to shuffling hoofs. She eyes a stray.
The healthy bucks set off the herd's stampede,
Releasing her like brakes. Intentions freed,
She starts her sprint, this cat who hunts by day.

With undulating spine, this specialist,
Hind quarters pushing fifty-miles-an-hour,
Soon overtakes the antelope in dust.
This makes her third attempt; twice now, she's missed.
She can't always succeed despite her power.
This time she heard her cubs and knew she must.

OCELOT
(Felis pardalis)

She was crowned with saffron light
in a jacaranda tree, her mauve-blossomed throne
her favorite surveying spot, her haven for her young.

She sat licking light from the faces of two
half-weaned replicas, eyes defined blackly, limned
in hieroglyphics. She stretched, surrendered to morning.

Her nostrils filled suddenly, strangeness
tainted her tongue. A new presence disturbed
order, disconcerting the flux of sounds and scents.

The man was jungle wise. His canoe crossed
swatches of sunwake, slid quietly onto her bank.
He tracked shadows, leaf-light, snake hiss, macaw cry.

She watched him circle below,
culling colors from light, unraveling camouflage.
Her brood obeyed her, motionless. He raised his weapon.

Sun exploded like glass, crazing silence.
The tree quivered with her pain, broken flowers,
shards of darkness, distorted time, falling, falling,

trying to overtake the first blood down,
torn teats, red-stained milk, dying all the way,
trying to stop, catch each twig, settle for the life left

at each petal shattered, each panicle passed.
Falling through hole after hole in reticulated light,
leafstreaks crosshatched on failing brightness, down and

down, bruise shapes, reeling splotches,
recoiling forest, outraged verdure the hunter
could not hear. He only heard the ground receive her,

embrace her with green, make
a mossy hollow for her body, soft against
her stillness. The shredded shade followed her drop,

spread across her, a mended shroud.
She lay in grace, a note fallen from a treble staff.
The man bent over her, called her beautiful, claimed her coat.

NIGHTKILL
(Felis leo)

It was not for hunger. His motives
old as allegiance to his own blood,
the strange cat followed the pride
for days. Five lithe females, four cubs,
no signs of a male benefactor.

He was part of kopje shadows and grass
extravagant with his scent. He chuffed
his presence on cooling twilight,
rolled his grunts downhill,
banked hoarse calls off termite mounds.

Beneath veldt thunder in moonless hours
black as his mane, impatience arrowed him
straight to the hidden young. He snapped
the neck of each sleeping cub,
leaving each where its mother hid it.

As he waited for the females
to return from their hunt, discover
their loss and feel their triggered heat
for him-- his own ancient bane,
always tracking death, closed in.

Six sets of jaws designed to break bones
missed their chance. Loping legs
fled in treble-crazed dark. Silhouetted
against low lightning, the victor straddled
the matriarch's throat, a red rictus
replacing her torn out laughter

as the lionesses arrived
to meet their new king.

AFRICAN SYNOPSIS, THE BAOBAB TREE
(Baobab: "upside down tree" in Swahili)

Morning:

An inkblot on the sun
erupts hundreds of finches like a geyser
against crazed sky.
Zigzag in slow motion
a black quill
returns to tangled branches of calligraphy.
Wayward roots that grew bark
and aspired to heaven,
lurch upward to await the twilight embrace
of winged exclamation points who won it.

Afternoon:

Twisted lines on sheets of glare,
an ancient narrative
of heathen heat blanches the horizon.
Biased shade accents last night's lion prints
punctuated by commas of fallen twigs.

Evening:

Reunited on the moon's page
birds and boughs compose
cryptic verses of quiet
rising above
the voices of the veldt howling hunger.

GULL WATCHING
(Larus, assorted)

Some fly from cliffs where needy limbs are patched
With ice and snow-- to sueded cypress knees
Where shadowed quietude is laced and thatched
With sun-bleached moss festooned from wading trees.
No longer do they plumb the darker seas,
These months the birds have claimed a Southern home.
They troll tidepools or hover on a breeze,
Awaiting shellfish rolling in on foam.
Some probe the estuary's monochrome
Or dive where sequin-flashing smelt appear
In schools above the jetty's catacomb;
Some hang around men fishing off the weir.
White wings pursue all boats, while gulls in flocks
Of dark-eyed patience spend their days on docks.

LAST STANZA

Blank volumes of snow and moon
Fill the canyon floor.

I search for poems
In white that gathers all sound

Rolling down the slopes
Between doe tracks and pine trunks.

A creaking lantern
Halos my unbelonging.

Pausing, I translate
Drag marks underlined in red.

Deer blood writes the theme.
A distant cougar cry rhymes.

GENUS: *Felis genius*

Deploring my ignorance
of energy and matter, the physicist next door
gave me his cat, a smile, and moved away.

"Big Einstein," this creature's called.
The fourth dimension is better understood
living with a life form that claims the realm
of clocks and calendars as its own.
The matter and energy are still hard to grasp.

Each morning before we explore theories
of relativity and the feline factor,
Einie tutors me impatiently in basic science:
Black fur density absorbs all light and warmth.
Eleven pounds plus four feet equals a time warp.
Nothing is squared; all is skewed.

The lesson wanders home, winding
circuitous orbits of shadow and shine,
skyward tail aquiver with equations
ending in another distinctive warp
its owner owes to lunar time
invested in arcane ritual.

Between his lives beyond, my lap
is a space station, limited, sometimes
not fully approved. I learn minute increments
of days and nights slowly while waiting
for the sidewise approach of distance

to rub my alien shins with forgiveness.

OLD WOMAN, THREE CATS

Four feline faces
turned up to the moon, letting it
find their white hairs, letting
its blessings blur their edges
like rubbed pastels
in an unfinished painting.

Four quarters of a whole, four phases:
one lapping moon off its feet,
one batting it with an ear,
one hoarding it in green eye tunnels,
the lady licking it off her lips,
studying ghost glow on her hands.

Their entities touch, blend, wait:
round-faced human, small sharp teeth,
the only female among them; existential
toms tolerating each other
for her long nails they crave, the milk.

She likes to feel furred darkness
fill the hollow night, random sacks
of warmth creeping into her sleep. She
ignores crosshatched mahogany, slashed
brocade, territorial habits, paws
printed in flour across her kitchen.

They vie for her lap, her ankles,
her chair arm. Engines of contentment,
they gaze sweetly at her wrinkles,
pose like omens on the bookcase
as she opens each day.
They listen as she reads and tells them
writers know less about life than they.

Old woman, three cats.

Glenna Holloway
913 E. Bailey Rd.
Naperville, IL 60565

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studying ghost glow on her hands.

Round-faced human, dainty nose, small
sharp teeth, the only female among them;
existential toms tolerating each other
for her long nails they crave,
the three generous bowls of morning milk.
Their entities touch, blend,
settle for the satisfactions of evening.

She likes to feel furred darkness
fill the hollow night, random sacks
of warmth creeping into her sleep.
She ignores crosshatched mahogany,
frayed brocade, territorial habits,
pawprints in flour across her kitchen.

They vie gently for her lap, her ankles,
her chair arm. Harmonizing engines,
they gaze unblinking at her wrinkles,
pose like omnificent omens on the bookcase
as she begins each afternoon.
They listen as she reads and tells them
writers know less about life than they.

Old woman, three cats.