

## *Ode to the Elephant*

*translated from the Spanish by Ilan Stavans*

Thick, pristine beast,  
Saint Elephant,  
sacred animal  
of perennial forests,  
sheer strength,  
fine  
and balanced  
leather  
of global saddle-makers,  
compact,  
satin-finished ivory,  
serene  
like the moon's flesh,  
with minuscule eyes  
to see—and not be seen—  
and a singing trunk,  
a blowing horn,  
hose of the creature  
rejoicing in its own freshness,  
shaking machine  
and forest telephone,  
this is how  
the elephant passes by,  
tranquil,  
parading his ancient façade,  
his costume  
made of  
wrinkled trees,  
his pants  
falling down,  
and his teeny tail.

Make no mistake:  
this gentle, huge jungle beast

is not a clown  
but a father,  
a priest of green light,  
an earthly progenitor,  
ancient  
and whole.

Bountiful  
in its tantalizing avarice,  
made of skin and fornication,  
the elephant kingdom  
grew accustomed to the rain.  
But then came  
a universal war,  
bringing  
silence  
with salt and blood.

The scaly forms  
of lizard-lion,  
mountain-fish,  
magisterial Cyclops  
fell away,  
decayed,  
fresh ferment on the marsh,  
a treasure  
for torrid flies  
and cruel beetles.  
The elephant awakened  
from its dethroned fear,  
but almost vegetative,  
a dark tower  
in the olive firmament, his lineage  
nurtured by sweet leaves,  
honey  
and rock water.

Thus he wandered through the forest,  
in weighty peace,

sensitive to the humidity of the universe,  
 decorated  
 with the clearest commands of the dew,  
 enormous, sad and tender,  
 until they found him  
 and turned him into a circus beast,  
 wrapped in human smells,  
 unable to breathe through his restless trunk,  
 without earth for his earthly feet.  
 I saw him coming in that day.  
 I remember his agony.

I saw the damned creature entering the Kraal,  
 in the jungle of Ceylon.  
 Drums and fire  
 had changed his path of dew,  
 and he was surrounded.  
 Like an immense king  
 he arrived,  
 caught between howl and silence.  
 He understood nothing.  
 His kingdom was a prison,  
 yet the sun was still the sun,  
 palpitating free light,  
 and the world was still verdant.  
 Slowly, the elephant touched the stockade  
 and chose me from everyone else.  
 I don't know why. Maybe it wasn't so,  
 could not have been,  
 but he looked at me  
 between the stakes  
 with his secret eyes.  
 His eyes  
 still pain me,  
 a prisoner's eyes,  
 the immense king captive in his own jungle.

That's why I invoke your gaze today,  
 elephant,

PLOUGHSHARES

lost between the hard stakes  
and the leaves.  
In your honor, pristine beast,  
I lift the collar  
of my ode  
so you may walk through the world again.  
My unfaithful poetry  
was unable to defend you then.  
Now I bring you back  
through memory,  
along with the stockade caging  
your animal honor,  
measured only by your height,  
and those gentle eyes,  
deprived forever of all they had once loved.