

The Animals

We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals.
- Immanuel Kant

Rooster Hubris

My master is the sun. He has appointed
me to tell him you are well.
He has asked me to tell him you are up.
Shall I? Shall I? What if today I wait
to hear you sing? Because I, the rooster,
have risen, now your spirit mounts the day.
I am the hero of warfare
and a true hero of the erotic.
I sing the sounds found in no book.
I am the cock-a-doodle-do.
I am a force of nature, an industrious lover.
I am the song of life.
I am, I am, I am, and I do. Listen for me. Oh,
listen to me. I do not listen to you.
I do not listen *to you*.

American Buffalo

How many we were, American buffalo.
How large we are, each and all, how many we were.
So very many, too many to count,
stampeded to the buffalo jump.
We were made to be your heavy coats.
We were the meat, we were the leather.
We were the sinew for bows. We were the grease.
We made the dung for your fires.
We were the hooves turned into glue.
We were the last bits of marrow in hard times, too.
We wallowed to groom. We huddled in herds.
We thundered, and we frightened the birds.
We fought off the wolves and the grizzlies.
We ran through the chutes, away from men,
thundering to get free. Still,
we gave you clothing, we gave you heat.
We gave our hides to shelter.
We were too good to you.
We gave you what to eat.
In the storybooks, we stood until
we were hollow bodies and brittle bones.
Then we collapsed from within. Look for our kind
at the top of the Medicine Wheel. Once,
we had a future that is not the future we have.
Still, we have a past that will remain our past.
We jumped our heavy bodies over the cliffs.
We have learned not to run.

Stork

We sold the stork a story.
We gave the stork its name.

Its voice, a clattering of bills.
We traced the sweep of its wings.

We could see, in the rookery of the storks,
in colonies of pelican and of crane,
in the short flight of parent after parent
to their chicks, outflying the night,
how these birds, so starkly ungainly on land,
can hold up such beauty in the air.

Charley Horse

I am the dead leg, the granddaddy,
I am the corked thigh. Does it hurt?
Oh horse that excels in warfare, I am not thee.
Oh peaceful beasts of burden, I am not thee, not thee.
I trot inside your quadriceps. I snort. You moan.
I canter up and down. Oh, I prance when you wince.

I am an animal, too, because I am you.
Do you have feelings for me?
You *must* have feelings for me.
Because I am you. I am you, too.

I am the horse of the deep purple,
I am the horse sense of your flesh.
Can you feel my unshod hooves?
I can feel your hand calming me.
Oh, hear me whinny and neigh.
Shall I live inside you all day?
Am I not real if I feel what you feel?

You have your plow horses, your thoroughbreds.
Why, then, are there sawhorses?
Why are there gift horses,
if not to enlarge the bestiary?

Confess that you gave birth to me.
I am a tiny piece of your bad luck.
I am alive within you. Call me Chuck.

Polar Bear

Look into the white to see me.
I am the loneliness of a polar bear
as the ice melts beneath me.
I am the far beauty in an aviator's eyes,
but he is not beautiful to me.
Look down here, where I walk
in the vast, vacant air that surrounds me.
I scare the Finnish countryside.
The spirit of your forefathers is in me,
walking alone in the unframed cold,
a bit seen but, in the main, this unseen me.
I have not seen the beauty that you see.
I have not seen your love or care of me.
If ever you truly see me, you will draw
me ever larger. I patrol the very top
of a dying planet. I am not eternal.
I am dying, because I am not you.
Because I am me.

Camel

I am more than a camel. I am a mountain.
Do you see in me, humped,
your stooped parent? Do I not kneel, then rise
to shoulder your burdens, and your dreams?

Vulture

We gave you your first flute.
If you would sing of life,
let it be of life and death.

We gave you a wing bone
that bore five holes for your breath.
Oh, if you would sing of life,
let it be of life and death.

We who eat carrion,
who eat the carcasses of buffalo,
and of stork and peacock,
we who dine on raw leftovers,
we are fit to make music, too.

Oh, sing of it. Celebrate the one
who will be there when you need me.
I'll be there. I'll be there,
who will be there when you need me.
When life is over, I'll be there, I'll be there.

Peacock

While you were listening to the whale,
and while you were teaching the chimpanzee to speak,
and training the parrot to ape you,
and running the horse in a circle, and the rat in a maze,
we cried out, all on our own: peacocks! peacocks! peacocks!
Inside each of us was a person, shrieking.
Inside each of us was the beauty we unfolded in feathers.

Fanned out, the peacock has eyes that do not see.
It tiptoes inside a shimmer. In an iridescence.
Regal dragons who scream, they also squeak and bray.
Their terrible beauty gives them away.
Listen how they muster loudly.
They blare like taxis.
They attack like trombones.
They squawk. They screech. They strut.
They are land lovers but can fly.
They have a sound for whatever they feel.

While you were banding the egrets,
and while you were tracking the shark out to sea,
and training the dolphin to kiss you,
and queuing the lions to act, and the seals to juggle,
we cried out, all on our own: peacocks! peacocks! peacocks!
Inside each of us was a person, shrieking.
Inside each of us was the beauty we unfolded in feathers.

Do you like the queenly apparitions that we are?
Do you like the kingly apparitions that we are?
Do we not make your world more beautiful?
And does our beauty not terrify you?
We have more than one effect on you. We have two.

And while you were listening to the whale,
and while you were teaching the chimpanzee to speak,
and training the parrot to ape you,
and running the horse in a circle, and the rat in a maze,
we cried out, all on our own: peacocks! peacocks! peacocks!
Inside each of us was a person, shrieking.
Inside each of us was the beauty we unfolded in feathers.

Coda

How extra-ordinary,
who walk or swim or fly,
all of us, glorious.
We peacocks do not lie.
Listen at dawn and dusk.
We, too, can speak. We can sing.
Like the whale,
like the chimp and the mynah,
like the rooster, like the buffalo,
like the horse, the stork, the camel,
like the high vultures you fear,
we are near. And we are talking, too.
We are talking, each of us talking, to you, to you.
Yes, we are talking to you.
We are talking, yes, we are talking to you.
To you, we are talking to you.