

ANIMAL AFTERLIFE

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animal afterlife

Poems

JAYA STENQUIST

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“What the current time demands is a genuine reckoning with ourselves as the agents of mass extinction... we need to keep faith with death and in so doing to own up to the reality of the world that we are ushering in.”

THOM VAN DOOREN AND DEBORAH ROSE,
“Keeping Faith with Death” presented at
Dangerous Ideas in Zoology

“Master Of The Hunt, why am i not feeding, not being fed?”

LUCILLE CLIFTON

ANIMAL AFTERLIFE

magpie

My grandfather's lions want to sleep beside him.

If you let one close, the rest get jealous and make a racket,
whining and pawing at the low bed, they stick their noses
in his stretched, open-mouthed face, wake him up.

He hates them, though the more they appear
the less he rages—he thinks they will eat him.
He has resigned himself to that.

*I don't think that's it, I say, the footpads of my fat, mangy lion
slapping the ground behind me. They only want to be noticed.*

He takes a year to make an inscrutable mark on a piece of paper.

I take his plate to the kitchen, scrape off the bite-sized pieces of omelet.

My grandfather is going to die in a different language than he was born.
My mother thinks that's the trouble, he doesn't have a vocabulary for death, never saw it—
but then none of us have. In America, we wait for death like the new high school principal.

I don't know if grief comes from instinct or a disassociation from it.
I heard when an elephant dies, magpies begin to follow its family around.

They rest together sometimes in the graveyards, cry insistent, wordless songs.

raising animals

Some children are raised by wolves.
We couldn't find our words
so we ran to the woods

and watched.

Feral children think they want to be farmers
want to keep horses, goats, maybe a few stray alpacas.
But the want is only to be near animals, to not talk. They
think in languages that do away with the terrible need
for letters, often, for sound. Never a dreamer

you were a kind of farmer—a rancher, once. That night
so childish, I asked for a story to bend the time, and after a pause
playing with where the ends of our hair met on the pillow
so similar in color and texture it was impossible to know
who you touched, who you wrapped around the other—
you told me how the best thing
you've ever gotten in the mail
was a box of baby ducks—soft, small, peeping.
You raised them up for a year and then
rounded them up—took them one by one away.
Somehow *they knew* you said *especially the last*—
you made duck confit out of their little bodies
but something went wrong, and the meat was too tough
gamey and difficult to eat. A good lesson. You were so good

at being human, you knew how to raise an animal
love in your hands when you fed them
love in your hands when you broke their necks.
You were never for a second out of love
so tender every time.

albatross

to have a name synonymous with burden
aching weight around your neck

weight to the wind wings
like my arms outstretched showing you *this*

big if I could be any animal I would be that one
beautiful-eyed big-bodied I'd run off a cliff

and never land
weeks above sea a

part of blue worlds between languages
arms outstretched forever because I would be always

lifted—
maybe

drowning and flying are the same thing really
apart from the comprehensible world

I'd like to live the life of a thing
not its meaning

binturong

(bearcat)

shiver against my snout when the wind
lifts my whiskers / I press them in close
no distractions
I walk the trees and leave myself everywhere
here has been a binturong / buttery self
here has been me and the cloud
of me / I am layers of self / muscle and bone
skin and fur and tufts— shadow and scent
to climb along a vine you need four paws and a tail
I am unafraid
except sometimes / reality / quivers
I shake my tail at it / I shake the hairs
back and forth in the dark / I sway
rhythm of body / air / body / tree
the world moves with me
until it is right / a body can be stronger than a soul
I know every muscle down to my gut / the force of its flex
I don't know how to kill
my work is balance
to hold
feel the shift of a hair on my built neck
to sway

black rhino

there's no sound
so beautiful as my footfall
in the dark / sound of myself / alone
milky light hits my tusk / the only touch
I permit / when I stand near the rocks
I am a rock
the earth and I
steady circle onward / I've never
hit anyone / never / committed violence
against my own species / sitting here
Christmas music blasting / little blonde
children running into my legs
I would like / the joy
of solitude / not the wanting
of your hand close enough to touch wine
in your parent's living room / sliding
home on the ice / there's no creature
more violent to itself than me / if I saw a reflection
I would paw the black dirt / white light
tuck my armored chin I'd
charge

blackburn's sphinx moth

the first me
was suspended life
underground I waited
with the white things the eyeless things
then I was many legs
rippling body of a being without hardness
I moved along green stems
unaware of poison unaware of wasps
that would make homes of me
now / I am a black thing
and I do not know / at what single point
I changed save the one
time of nothingness and pain
of awaking / struggling to breathe
as if someone drew a thread of molten iron through my body
my soul hung on it for a breath outside my lips
I had to retch for it
now here I am / hello / a new thing
overnight I got hard
over many nights I'm told / but I have no way of knowing
I miss being soft in the world
my time as a kitten in a basket / how I imagine myself
helpless mewling heat leaving my body so fast
most could never survive
no / most do not
but here I am a thousand years old
so rare most think I do not exist / that I do not eat
are all changed things forever broken?
I fly now I anoint my lips with honey

kākāpō

(green ground parrot)

this is what good feels like
hunger in the dark / / slow the body down / until / little is given / little
needed / life / is / so / long / I wait for the rimu tree to fruit / mine
is a body of green shadows I hold myself still
until night eyes dilate then blink / / I wait
for the rimu tree to fruit I will never again be able to sleep
beside someone / they're in the bed / they're
out of the bed / it goes on like that / on / and on / on / and / on / I'm
awake in the dark forever I love the sweet smell of myself
everywhere I go I am me I am remembered / I wait
for the rimu tree to fruit / hunger makes it easier to see
every minute not eating is time doing something I've
seen big bodies and they are beautiful and
I hate them I avoid parrots like
me when no one is watching / I hold
a leaf with my foot and strip with my beak / I leave behind
the bones / I am waiting for the rimu tree to fruit
the men will dig holes and *boom boom* sometimes *skraark*
tonight I watched a fat woman put sour cream
on top of cheese on top of meat / white / rice
like someone hit me / I was better than her
I shook my green feathers / I dragged my tail across the floor like a god

northern hairy-nosed wombat

the taste of golden beard grass
at midnight / almost like lemons / black speargrass
slightly bitter / I push my nose into the earth
let my mouth take in small bursts of dirt
there is nothing ground cannot
give / if I paw down
roots contain the sweetest break
water in a plant / oasis / I smell the night
like catching your ghost on my pillowcase
smells of animals and flowers something I can't
put a claw on / when the wild dogs begin to bark
I run through the dirt / my paws wide
when I find a slope I dig
prying open the earth
here are the things I am willing to give:
my back / the slope of my ass
the things / we trade / to save our hearts
our soft faces / our brains / yes
there are scars
but what pain you can endure
when you yourself choose
the exchange / the barking
forward
I dig / teeth / always
forward

pe'epe'emaka'ole

(no-eyed big-eyed wolf spider)

for so long I carried you in my mouth / the world
felt warm for you thick of life close to fire
I felt every breathing thing like a kind
of touching / inside my body changed
I will hold you for a year
I feel the turn / without eyes
we are the only ones who really know beauty
it's the fit of your teeth notched
in the hairs on my back / lock / I know this pressure
my fangs pressing into a body / that moment of puncture & break
each of your small bodies an atonement may you never know violence
once someone asked what I thought about the word
mother / holding her brown hands on the couch / tracing the thought of love
over and over until it could be true / how we teach ourselves
pain / your bodies like pearled onions
my body like a kind of airplane
elephant in the places the Earth is made
where it breaks