

Animal

for Jane Hirshfield

It is, isn't it, folly to think oneself
above stooping to the ugliest,
dirtiest
but necessary work? Your salvation
might be buried there
among men and women and worms. Or bacteria,
the good kind, or parasites, the leeches,
or a non-stop confession of your
most deeply wrenching sins.

Pull out the thorns,
but save them, you may need to prod
yourself later,
and there may be a psychic charge to needles
that have known what it's like
to live inside your flesh.

It seems, it seems
like folly to think oneself above anything
in the sense that one is not also
below it, in it, on par with the rats
and witches and spiders and furs. For God's sake,
for your sake, for fuck's sake, leave them on
the animals!

Unless, unless the time
has come and we must eat every knuckle
and put to use the entire kill. Then, wear it
like a second skin, the one you feel
on your arms in your dreams, the one you feel
two inches above your head, the one
that will save you when winter
comes collecting.

And if there are no more
resources, and it comes between you,
who have lived long, and the young, who have
lived short, but long enough to protect
each other:

take off the skin,
hand it over lovingly, with all the power
of your will—it was never really
yours to keep, it was only ever yours
to wear and touch for a little while.

Animalis

for Rosmarie Waldrop

I woke up this morning feeling fur, asked myself what I was dreaming. There was a certain silkiness to the touch that denied dog, felt feline even if the skin underneath was human. My tongue went to my teeth but they felt like my old nubs. I took a breath and my nostrils whistled their proper deviations, arched my back and *that* felt too good for a spine so ruptured and wrong, so I put off the mirror, put off the inevitable collapse into person, walked back toward the darkness, knocked on the door, told the mind to be quiet, shhh, we're asking those Egyptian slits what it takes to awaken claws in the fingers, to wag the tail that isn't there, to make the animal in the mind not human but natural, to show us how to stop being so upright, so wobbly, so unsure on feet that grow numb, so poisoned in the will by thoughts of *should we* and *if only we could*.

The answer I got was a hiss and a purr, a hum in the belly that played along the body like a reconfiguration of the ribs. A reminder to stay low, remember all fours, feet that know the ground and never wonder how to walk it, to sniff first and listen hard, haunches coiled with instinct when the next meal can be felt ahead in the bushes, to stop pretending there is any such thing as breakfast or dinner, just one life consumed and then, if luck stays with us, another and another, to chew grass when something spoils and the stomach needs to be purged, to chew corn-stalk for no reason other than it's good and bears repeating, and remembering in the limbs, where many things are remembered: the trees of old properties and bookshelves of apartments, the kittens who went walking and never came back, the smell of oceans and treasures that could break this nose open, the feel of sunlight in the desert where once we were gods, unafraid of our shadows, unafraid of our powers, unafraid of the invocation to stand up and play the part.

Preference

My cat sits on my chest and purrs.
I could wonder why, or I could put
my hand on her chest and feel it.
I try both. If purring louder is
any indication of preference,
she prefers my hand to my wonder.
I don't blame her. I prefer her purr.

Names Downriver

Have I named you, river?
I suppose I have, what was it, let me see.
The locals call you ol' trickle
but they don't call you that in spring,
and in winter they don't come often enough
to call you much of anything.

I suppose autumn's when
they look you over like a lover,
knowing somewhere deep
they're about to say goodbye.
And again in summer when
they welcome you back into wayward arms.
I've heard an even older name for you was

hu-wush-awa,

which meant the place to drink and wash away,
hopefully not the place to poo—
a little urine never hurt, or if it did, not me.

Slim source of life, that's it, what I called you,
dangling my feet on that too-warm day,
favoring your constancy over
the light's departure for other borders.
And murky vein, another name
when I felt dark inside and gloomy,
or when I wanted my wife to know
I was teasing to get a rise.

She would sometimes to please me,
and you too in your way,
though never at my prompting,
our ways of receiving too divergent
for you to pay me mind,
and your rises the kind as apt to cause concern
as momentary pleasure—stay where you are,
river, please stay where you are.

I drink you though, despite the warnings,
when I come to you thirsty and tired,
and you do not complain of the poisons
our neighbors have given you to give me.

I wonder, what will we or others like us
call you when English fades from local tongues?
Will we one day arrive at a speech
like your lapping, slurping jingle,
splash over and through each other
such utter, swirling,
blood of the land, vein of the earth,
draining and reviving music?

What does a name mean to you
who do not respond, do not speak it,
do not hear it, who it never touches
for all the times we talk over you
as though your voice weren't
wispig skyward and mingling with ours?

What do I know of what you speak,
hear, feel and send to me, unable
in my poverty of sensitivity
to register the finer machinations
of your liquor in the world?
Aren't you the moisture
above yourself in the air?
Don't you compose most of my body?

River, will your proper name
or at least a name that touches you,
that reaches you,
that comes from within you—
will one of your names come to me
if I tie your stones to my limbs,
lie down in you,
hold my breath as long as I can,
then speak?

And even then,
what would that name for you be
but a bubble
rising and breaking through your surface?
What but a river of being in a river of water
attempting a common language?

Dead Men, Dogs and the Long Bone of Everything

An ancient Asian poet said
the first word blossomed into all others
and every one of them is true.

His breath warms these lips:
isn't the first wind continuous in the sigh
my dog releases across the room?

Every side of the poem responds
to itself in the sides it meets,
and the sides it doesn't: it's still calling:

If I weren't already in you
feeling you here in my chest, I wouldn't
know the shape your heart takes

when you open your senses to make room:
whatever comes revealing one's boundary
on the other side of horizon: far

as far is, and then some.