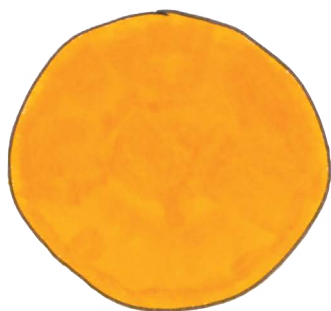


BROWN LEMMINGS

A N D O T H E R C R E A T U R E S



poems by
Alison Fuller





Brown Lemmings and Other Creatures

Poems by Alison Fuller

Cover based on “The Brown Lemming Exhibition”
by H. V. Murphy, Fall 1982

illustrations by

Judith J. Ogden
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&
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Brown Lemmings and Other Creatures

First Edition

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Introduction & Acknowledgements

Most of the poems in this collection date from a couple of decades when I lived in Altadena and participated in writing workshops. In 1980, just as I finished a term as president of the League of Women Voters of Pasadena, I learned that I had developed cataracts caused by glaucoma surgeries I had undergone in my 20's. The Eye Clinic at UCLA at that time would not do lens implants in a 50-year-old, so they removed one lens and consigned me to wearing bottle-bottom glasses while waiting for medical advances — which did finally enable me to have a vision-saving implant 10 years later. With my only daughter gone from the nest and no substantial community office to replace my League work, I now faced major life restrictions and, in short, felt a bit unsure what to do with myself.

Then, one evening, at a party for a friend who had just earned her PhD on Maoist China, I broke open a fortune cookie and read this message:

Utilize your special talent or all is lost!

This was no ordinary, anodyne fortune cookie message. It was urgent, specific and seemed to speak directly to me. I began pondering whether I had a “special talent” and what it might be. I remembered how I had loved to write rhymed verse as a child. I had mostly given it up after feeling intimidated by majoring in English Lit, but I did have fun cranking out occasional doggerel for family events. I decided to try my hand at “real” poetry, so I signed up for the poetry workshop at Pasadena City College.

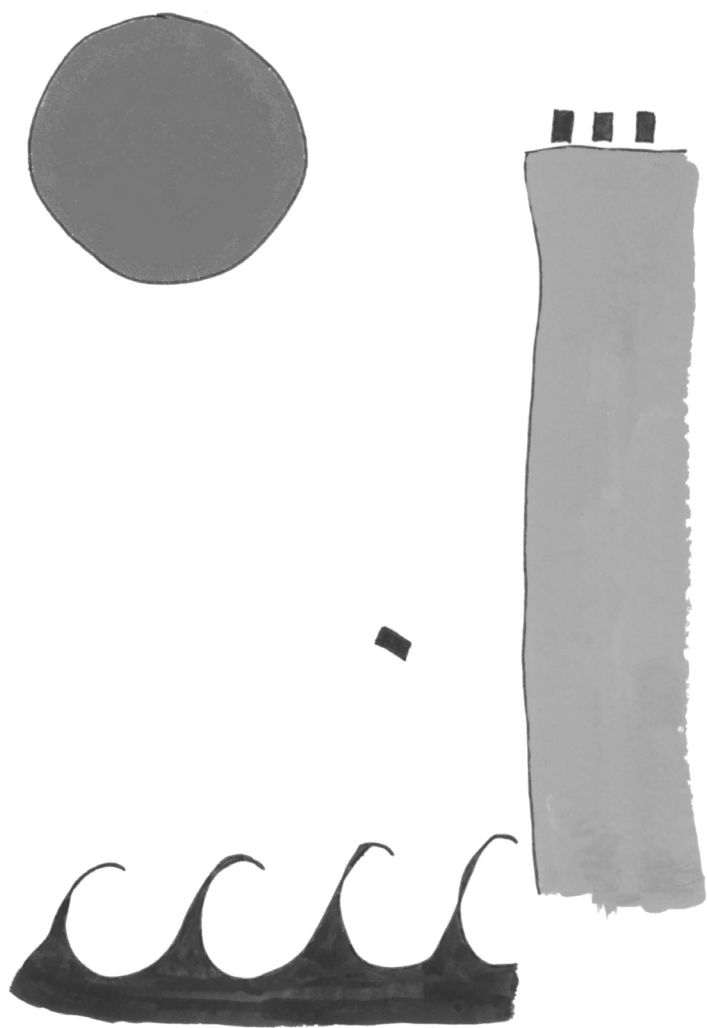
Under the guidance of Ronald Koertge at PCC and later of Jean Burden, I had fun trying new verse forms and writing a lot of poetry. One of my classes even required me to write a poem

every day for a month! Thanks to those fine teachers and to my classmates, and to Beverly Antaeus and her canoeing/writing trips with poet Sharon Olds, that tedious decade waiting for the implant in my left eye was one of my happiest.

The idea for publishing a chapbook of my poems was born when my late friend Judith Ogden, a professional scientific illustrator, began illustrating some of my poems about animals. All of her illustrations are in this book (unsigned), as well as several by my artist grandson Sam Bivins, a graduate of the UCLA School of Art & Architecture, and one by my granddaughter Claire. The painting by Harry Murphy that has hung on my wall for many years, professionally photographed by Mark Gottlieb, provided the cover and title for the book. Lynn Fuller and Sam Bivins co-managed the many details of producing the book, from digitizing my typed poems all the way to picking the book up from the printer. Zack Bivins built our website

Thanks, finally, to all the friends who have encouraged my poetry writing over the years — especially Constance Crawford, co-adventurer and inspiration — and to my readers, past, present and future. I hope this book gives you pleasure.





Brown Lemming Exhibition

The lemmings march by ones,
Sometimes by two or three.
They march straight on until they plunge
Into the curly sea.

The lemmings drop like stones
Into the sea, and then
They swim around and clamber up
The cliff and jump again.

— for Harry Murphy in appreciation for his painting

The Day I Died

Summer afternoon in Michigan.
Idle and empty-headed as a spent yoyo,
I stood looking out my window over the porch roof
Too hot to crawl out on today.
The back lawn sweated, full of August wealth:
A thousand tiny toads no bigger than a dime.
My father couldn't mow.
My mother's peach tree, long past
its pink glamour, molded
yellow balls in its long, green fingers.
Raspberry canes and currant bushes,
the victory garden and laundry lines
defined our land. Beyond lay my woods,
a string of sacred secret places.

I'd seen it all a hundred times,
this burnished view, now suddenly
turned strange, as if I'd bitten
into an apple and found
not flesh but void.
All this could be here, I knew,
will be here and I not.
I felt how it would be not to be:
Hollow at first as a lost acorn cap
but then all right.
All right, all right so long as this goes on.

Where We Lived

Before you speak, think about that summer at the cabin
in Waterton Lakes.

The days it rained we burned
the old boat in the stone
fireplace, while you read me
War and Peace up to the last
hundred pages. Other times
we followed green trails to brooks
whose stones were dance steps and once
came face to face with three rams,
their big horns still pink with new blood.
They left the trail to us.

You hung my hammock on the screen porch;
I read Thoreau in it while mule deer
browsed seedlings of dead aspen
In the meadow and ground squirrels
harvested. One whole evening
we watched a spider trap and wrap
a moth, all nerves and expertise.
You taught me to like spiders.

You stoked the wood stove for me
to bake bread that never rose
and one Saskatoon berry pie.
I left it for the bears.

We took the boat to Goathaunt
to celebrate the Fourth and our first.
We saw the US. flag (but no goats)
and went back uplake to Canada,
the borderline dissolving under us
like other needless barriers.

—*For my husband, Brock Fuller (1927-2009)*

Heaven

Once, I knew it was a place
like our school rotunda, but vast
and gold. God sat on the stage,
assigning angels to the grades.
You earned your wings by being good.
Later, the word was, “It’s here now:
an inner room you find by being still.”
The ante rises; I may be shut out.
And yet I feel it, sometimes,
sense its outskirts, like the breath
from ceiling fans on a hot night,
just stirring the air.

Of one thing I am sure: there are
no phones. What calls will be water.
In monsoonstruck Assam, a woman
wet as a newborn lifts streaming arms
and cries, “Paradise will be like this.”
I wouldn’t go that far: Small rain,
stream banter, the castinet
of calm seas — where I can, thoughtless
of oxygen, sound with turtles —
suffice. But most of all,
what adumbrates heaven is
a kind of light, thrown down
with largesse like the gesture
of a Kashmiri merchant tossing out
a hundred silk saris on his floor
of polished teak: the late-day light.

Out in the garden, a dark shape
splays like a shadow on the oak tree trunk:
a thieving squirrel is thinking a way
into the pendant bird feeder, squirrel-proof.
Hind claws stapled in the bark,
repeatedly he reaches for the tray.
Finally, by some leap he bridges air
and sits swinging at ease,
neither good nor still.

Light-seekers

At the Bonaire Turtle Club lecture,
tall young Dutchmen with long blond hair tell
of the precarious lives of sea turtles —
Green, Hawks-bill, Loggerhead and Leatherback,
every one endangered. The hatchlings
dig out of their beach birthing place en masse —
the only way they can ascend the walls
of their tomb-like nest — only at night.
I see them wedged together halfway up,
all the long, hot Caribbean day,
waiting for the hour of their release.

Breaking out on the sand in a dark wave,
they find their way to sea by seeking light:
the moon's reflection on the water.
Their compass, we are told, is this: the need
to have light shine in both eyes equally.
Should a hotel be built behind their beach,
its nighttime glare will lure them the wrong way.
So many hazards loom for them, it takes
a thousand young to grow just one adult.

No human life is half so hard, and yet
we share the quest for light — light in both eyes,
the worldly-wise and dreamer-visionary.
The artificial blaze of signs and screens
that dominates our world by night and day
may dazzle us so that we wander off
like distracted hatchlings drawn away
from the ocean that is their destiny.

It Happened in Massachusetts

I stopped at a place called Bartholomew's Cobble,
Which wasn't a village with cobblestone streets.
It wasn't a shoemaker a.k.a. cobbler.
Nor was it the kind of a cobbler you eat.

What it was (and still is) is a rocky outcropping
Made half of marble and half of quartzite,
Which when they dissolve form both acids and bases,
Providing each fern spore a gourmet delight.

The hanging fern gardens are shaded by hemlocks,
And the calm Housatonic meanders nearby.
I reveled in solitude, shadow and silence
Until three raucous birdwatchers caught ear and eye.

I stepped off the trail at the hest of my guidebook
To explore an especially fern-fested place,
And just as I skirted a gawky young pine tree,
A chickadee suddenly flew in my face.

"It's probably hungry," observed one birdwatcher.
"Hold these sunflower seeds out and stand very still."
A statue-of-amity human bird feeder
Was in place in a trice on the side of that hill.

The chickadee dropped to the tip of my finger,
Cocked its eye and selected a seed and was off.
Then another arrived and likewise didn't linger,
But scarfed up as bold as a pig at a trough.

I felt like the mystical saint from Assisi
Of whose way with the wing-ed I've always heard tell,
And now I too know bird-befriending is easy,
At least while you're under Bartholomew's spell.

A Noise in the Garden

Sounds like a signal
from something technical
gone haywire. Head twists,
oscillant throat emits
notes from a livid laser
or deranged computer.

Suddenly
in another tree
by electronic transfer,
a hummingbird sings his own answer.

To a Squirrel

I covet first your tail —
ticked, quivering perfection —
never having felt well clothed
in anything I wore.

But more, I want your ease
in climbing (as a kid,
I couldn't chin or shinny):
How you fling up trunks
and trace each branch
to its breathless end, then flit
to another twig.
That's flight enough for me!

I thought your style and skill
were all I envied;
then I heard your voice:
What a relief, I thought,
in such scolding to vent
an irascible temperament!

The Ants

I - Morning

In their most massive assault to date,
a frenzied horde streams up one side,
across the top and down the other side
of the refrigerator. A surprising
number succeed in wriggling past
the gasket on the freezer side.
In autumn's drought, I left a wet sponge
on the counter near their entry.
They would drink like cattle at a trough
and go. Now famine is the spur.
Like desperate dark bodies on the nightly news,
the ants arouse compassion, but there is, too,
the horror of a final bastion breached.
Their search for manna ends
in the Amana, where they do not thrive.
Like polar explorers in the dark,
they slow, wander in circles,
succumb to hypothermia. None yet
has made it to the ice cream. Question:
if none returns, how do the others
know to follow? What scent calls
through layers of urethane?

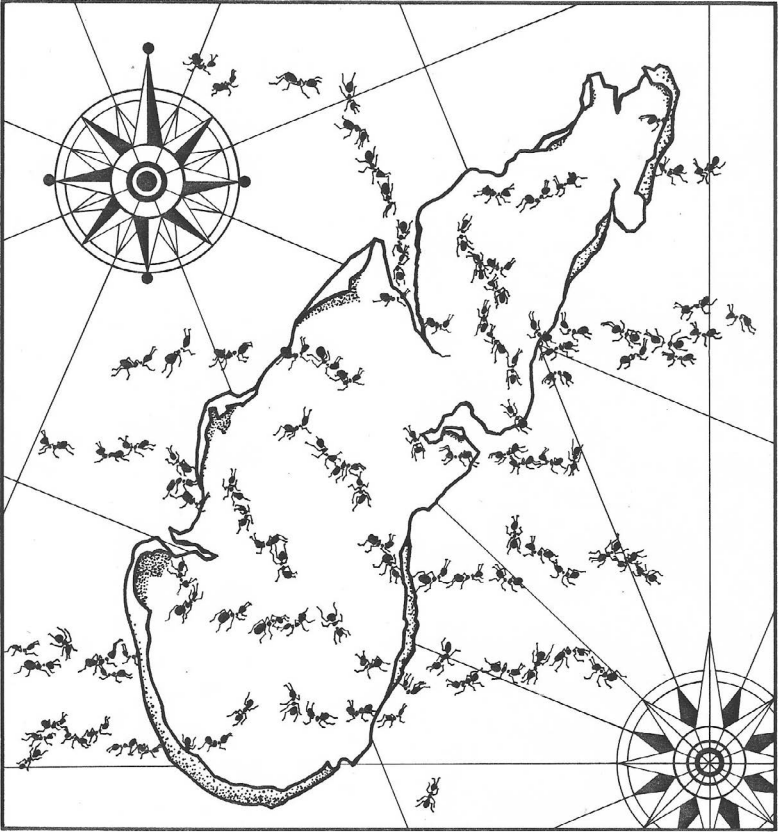
II - Afternoon

A crumb of ham from my husband's lunch
inspires my feeding station. I strew
along their path additional morsels:
ham with fat, persimmon peels with pulp,
cookie crumbs. Like us, they are
suspicious of the new. Each entree
is tested by taste-and-retreat before
it gains a fringe. A persimmon piece
shaped like Madagascar wears its ants
like the tiny names of many rivers
on an ancient map. The total scene
is like a trade fair with some visitors
clustered at the booths, while others
hurry past to their next seminars.
And I, the chef and impresario,
am entertained, intrigued, and best of all,
I feel benevolent.

III - Evening

The ham is sucked dry, the ants
boil unabated, and my husband says
he's sick of them. Obediently, I
revert to Housewife archetype,
intolerant of insect infestation.
I caulk, spray water, mop them up
with paper towels, assiduous
in my Destroyer mode. It is no brief
candle I snuff out; I know the facts —
an ant can live as long as fifteen years.
Their diligence and discipline are,
what's more, superior to mine.
Instead of the Red Cross, I have become
Something like the Stalin of the purges.

I knew a woman living at the beach
who asked the fleas to leave and so had none.
I wish I could speak Ant.



How to Live Forever

While tracking down the life span of the ant
In the encyclopedia, by chance,
Or what is known as serendipity,
I stumbled onto immortality:

“Some organisms appear to be potentially immortal.
Unless an accident puts an end to life,
they appear to be capable of surviving indefinitely.
This faculty has been attributed to certain fishes and reptiles
which appear to be capable of unlimited growth.”

Imagine yourself a great white shark, crossed
With a crocodile — the most
Perfect eating machine alive,
Amphibious to boot. You thrive
On string bikinis, squid and turtle
Until, relentlessly immortal
And growing several miles per week,
You feel at length a need to seek
The one clear shot around the world
At 60 degrees south. It's cold,
But someday you can catch up with your tail.

If the demanding lifestyle lacks appeal,
Read on:

“It is notable that the absence of aging processes
is correlated with the absence of individuality.
In other words, organisms in which the individual
is difficult to define, as in colonial forms,
appear not to age.”

So you can beat
The raven’s rap and even the crow’s feet,
The easy way: just join a colony
And blend in like a polyp or a bee.
Becoming indistinguishable
May render you unextinguishable,
But should the time come for you to go,
No one — not even you — will ever know.

— *Quotations: Encyclopedia Britannica*
15th Ed., vol. 10, p. 911.

The Way the World Ends

Rhinoceros stands mildly by
A dead thorn tree, his caper eye
Myopic. Calla-lily ears
Rotate routinely. What he hears
Is fly drone — not tire crunch, bolt snap.
Instead of smelling rat or trap,
His monumented nose dreams rains to come.
The tail whisk, steady as a metronome,
Does not much incommode the flies.
His tonnage shifts. Dust devils rise
Between his toenails.

Suddenly, this barge
Whirls ballerina-lightly, set to charge
At enemies perceived too late.
His custom-fitted armor plates
Were not designed against Garand.
He totters briefly where he stands,
Then crumples like a dynamited wall.
His leather seems to billow in the fall
As softly as a silken parachute.

Now rendered static, blind, deaf, mute,
The myth-infested visage can be shorn.
That tuft of hardened hair known as the horn,
Hacked off and sent to Asia to be sold,
Will fetch at least ten times its weight in gold:
When pulverized it will restore
Limp libidos in Singapore.

Kodiak Arrest

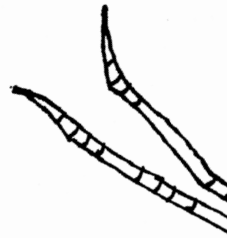
These are not the bears that comforted your crib.
Their eyes are not black buttons
But beads of amber from cold seas.
They stand thick as tree trunks
Seeming to take root, but then they move
Swift as spirits, running like horses
Footless, jointless in the wind.
They do not seek their kind,
But in the chub-choked streams
They will stand shoulder-to-shoulder
A solid brown phalanx
Against eagles, ravens, the coming snows.
Sated on what they choose — skins, brains
Or only roe — they move on to dessert
Grazing the tiny tundra berries
Eating bush and all to make their weight
For winter. In their massive sleep
Do they dream of what we have in store?



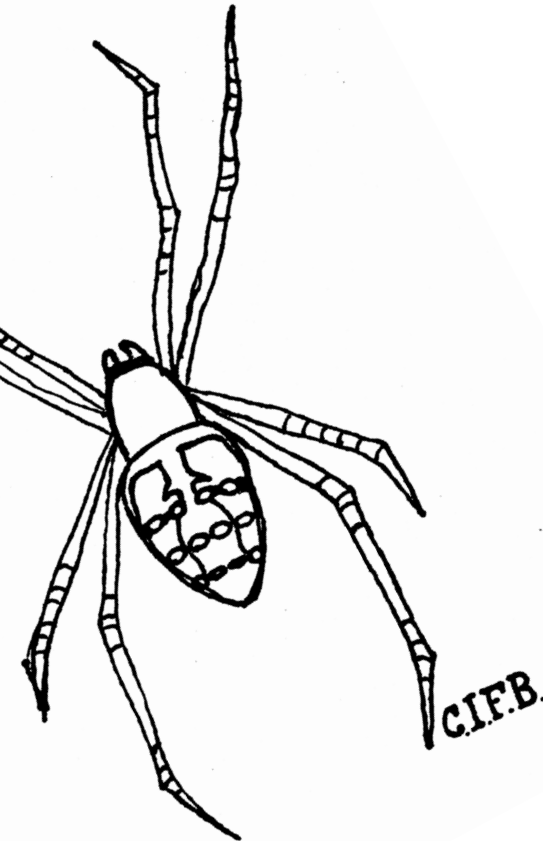
Tarantella

A year ago I found myself smitten
with spiders. My love declared,
spiders came to me. For the first time,
large ones honored our garden. Nights,
three at once slung nets across the driveway.
We'd see them in the headlights and stop short:
Bodies the size of grapes, gorgeously arrayed
in designs like rattlesnakes.

My favorite built by the porch light,
spooling her web mornings to redeploy
at dusk in a slightly different place,
as if experimenting. She hung
in the center of her world all night,
vanished by day. Next to appear
were jumping spiders smaller than the dot
cut by a paper punch, with eyes
like swimmer's goggles. No sissy webs
for them: they leap like tigers on the prey.
No loitering, either: they'd land
on my hand, give me a look and be gone.



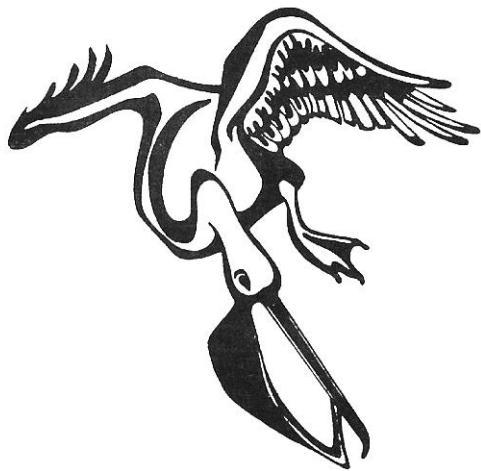
I've heard that Spider Woman taught
the Navaho to spin and weave,
and from Greek mythology recall
the weaver who incurred Athena's wrath.
If ambition to create has drawn
arachnids to my aid, I'll pray to them:
Teach me craft: orb, funnel, cobweb makers.
Make me ruthless, jumpers.
Above all, all of you, lend me
your famous patience.



Secrets of Bird Life

What do birds do in the rain?
Are their nests watertight and soggy
or do they drain?
Is it true birds can hear a worm digesting
under the ground?
Once they pull one up,
how do they get it down?

Do birds really mate for life
(those that are monogamous)?
If so, how do they manage?
Is it just because
their lives are short, brutish
and absent of in-laws?
Do the kids (eggs, fledglings) keep them
too tied up to fool around
and too tired to think of anything,
profane or profound?



Or is the secret of bird commitment
what happens every spring
when Nature says, “Renew those vows!
Raise your right wing”?
No one who’s watched a pair of doves
billing and cooing
can doubt they believe in
what they are doing.

Because we admire their other skills,
e.g. singing and flying,
birds have always been our mentors.
Their message: Keep trying.

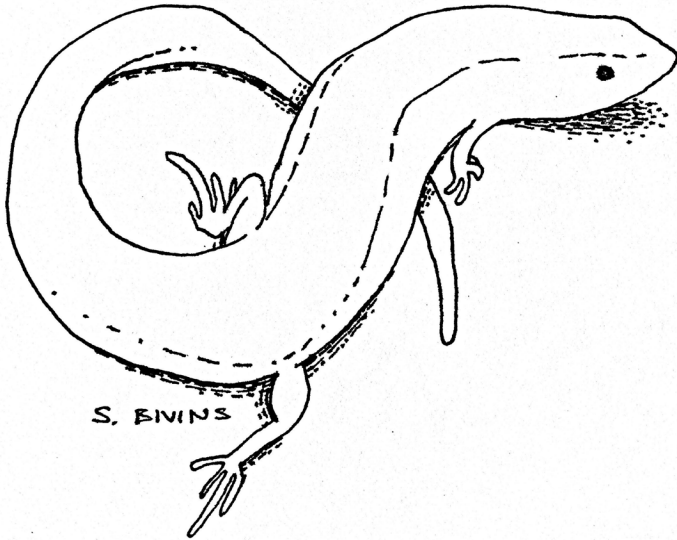
— *Note: This doggerel was originally published in the Pasadena Star News. It evoked my only fan letter, from an acquaintance who had moved away but still subscribed to the paper. She wrote, “I have always wondered the same things!”*

Last Lizard

It was to be a routine Sunday
working in the yard. When I throw back
the black tarp from the compost heap,
the lizard is there, not five feet away,
surprised to be exposed as I to see
this creature with a broad stripe down its back
yellow as cowslips or the road to Oz.
We both freeze, I in fear that it might flee
by climbing the pink wall that separates
ours from the neighbor's yard, a wilderness
of order, where the lizard would fall prey
to cat or mocking bird. I used to find
red salamanders stowed in every cache
of dampness, narrow as earthworms
with threadlike legs. They aren't here anymore.
I need this lizard more than it needs me.

I form a plan: my helper will arrive,
fetch the garden wastebasket, and I
shall shoo the lizard in for safekeeping
while the compost is turned.
He's late, and I am stuck. Trying to be
imperceptible, I fold and squat.
We sit, companionable as Quakers,
in silence, but with formality,
like strangers waiting for the pipe of peace.
A prodigy of stasis, the lizard
moves not the pupil of its golden eye
nor one fine claw. Under its spell,
I ignore the numbness rising to my knees.
Ours is a communion of cold blood.

Finally, impelled by weaker flesh,
I creep the few feet to the wastebasket,
return and do the deed as easily
as if I had been able to convey
my benign intentions and as if
the lizard trusted me. What is trust,
after all, but this: I am not your food.

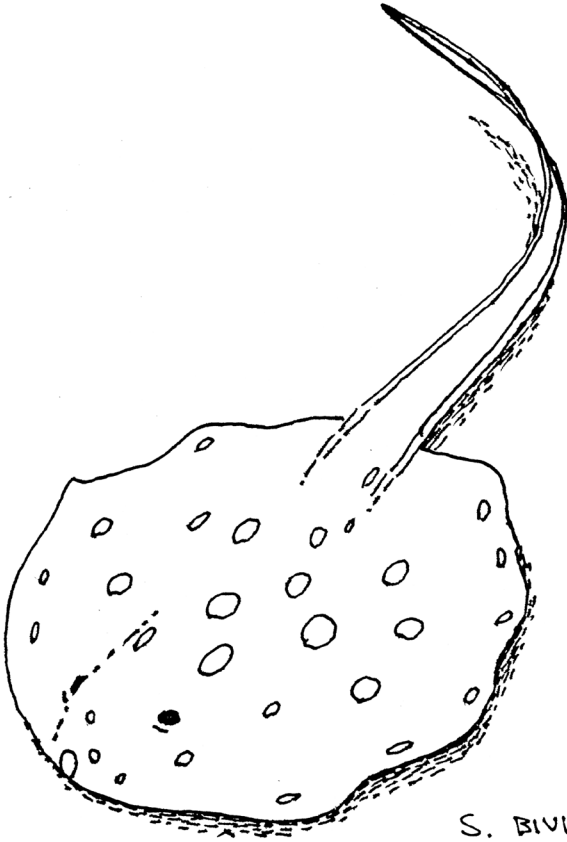


Guitar Serenade

You were the last of God's creation
I ever thought I'd love. Long before
I laid eyes on one of your kind
your fearsome press preceded you.
Excepting only the great white shark,
you were the last fish I meant to meet.

When I first saw you in the shallow bay
where I snorkeled, your mottled nonchalance
and whip-like tail provoked a thrill of fear.
But when you sailed away, edges rippling
like flamenco skirts, I was entranced
as José by Carmen. I pursued.
You fled until, weary at last
of being stalked, you played the trick
that left me in your thrall: with one shudder
you sifted underneath the bottom sand.
Only two pebbles — ancient, dreaming eyes —
were left above to focus my desire.

Enamored, I denied that you could be
a stingray: Guitarfish was what I hoped.
Pacific Coast Inland Fishes refused
to back me up.
What's in a name?
My love song's mine to strum across the strands
of memory: Guitar...guitar...guitar.



S. BIVINS

Conversation with an Animal Control Officer

Do I have pets? Yes, one: the chrysalis
of a tomato horn worm in that jar.
I love the color, like mahogany,
the shape like an ancient amphora
with one graceful handle: picture it
borne by a stylish woman in a frieze
at Knossos. That one might have been
filled with rare unguents. Mine contains
a sphinx moth waiting: it missed
the spring hatch by one week.
Now it must sleep till June. I am glad.

How can it be called “pet” without any
emotional connection? I have run
a gamut, as they say. First, Glee
at having seen it, no longer than
my little finger joint, the same green
as tomato leaves, striped white
like a New Guinea warrior’s face,
and on one end a minuscule red thorn.

Curiosity: how long would it grow
and how fast, if I let him live?
He measured in at two-point-two c.m.
and ate, converting leaves into castings
shaped in perfect eight-petaled rosettes.
Imagine the Guilt I felt, finding him once
lying slack upon the paper towel,
not one leaf left. Imagine, too, the Pride
when in ten days my caterpillar reached
nine centimeters — the length of my palm.

Anxiety: he stopped eating and stormed
about the jar for two nerve-wracking days.
I watched with horror while he shrank,
fading to brown, and found a form
as alien as a teapot.
Astonishment: I had learned about
complete metamorphosis in sixth grade,
but truth is no truth, Shelley said, until
you have tried it upon your pulses.
Anticipation (best of all emotions)
awaits the day when one of us has wings.



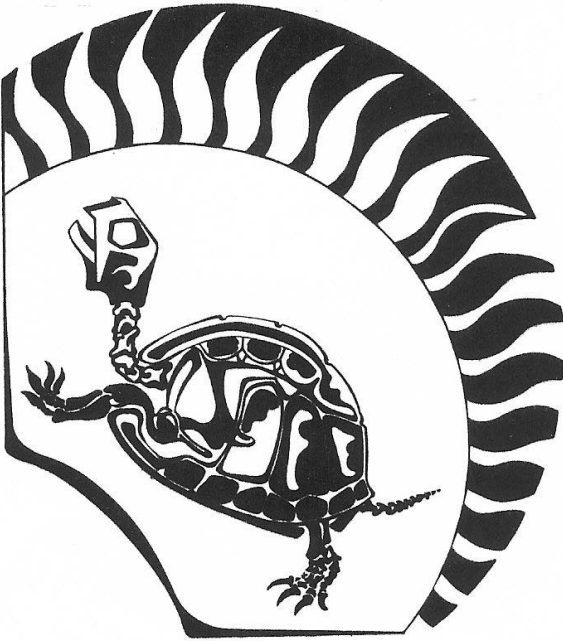
To a Turtle Consumed by Fire

When we first met at the Nature Center,
I was offended by the darkness.
The desert tortoises had outdoor pens.
Even the nocturnal woodrat saw the light of day.
Your box was kept under a counter, like contraband.
I had seen turtles enough to know
they love the sun. Necks long,
heads pointed true as compasses,
they worship their hot-blooded god.

The label read "Eastern Box Turtle,"
but you were not for closure.
Distance was the agenda,
the map was on your carapace.
Red eyes blazing you scoured
your cramped domain for exits.
Growing up between ponds in Michigan,
I knew turtles as compulsive travelers.
Gravely, they crossed our lawn to Oakland Drive.
That some got smashed did not deter the rest.

I took you out to walk in the sun.
I loved the way you cocked your eye, the way
you walked on tiptoe. I admired
your sleek head, your exquisite shell.
The day the firestorm took the mountain front,
an official blocked my way to you.
"The Nature Center burned this morning.
We were nearly overwhelmed," he said.

Now it is my turn to go around
in the confines of this question: was
your death by fire in captivity
worse than another might have been
in what we call the wild? One other thing
I wonder: did you have one last bask
before you died
in the sudden sun that came to you?



Beach Math

Bird tracks are variations
On a theme of three:
The big white gull's bold trident,
Shy willet's fleur-de-lys.

Paw prints are four-leaf clovers
Planted in quatrains
Spaced wide, dug deep by running:
Dog ecstasy engrained.

Bare human feet leave potholes
Revealing how they drive
The heels or metatarsals.
Toes always count to five.

Six small heads in the ocean
Are not an otter pack
But patient surfers floating.
Their boards will leave no tracks.

A tidy three by seven
Is one small tract, clean-swept,
Beside a trashcan, print
Of where a homeless person slept.

Tire treads complete the microcosm:
Bird, beast, man, machine.
The forearm of an eight-foot tide
Will wipe the blackboard clean.

Felis New York

She sleeps round on door edges
Or in long luxury on eiderdown.
Where is she hiding now?
On zero she'll explode,

Skim rugless floors,
Poloing her prey,
Or squirrel up bookshelves,
Reveling in feigned woods.

While I work she prowls my desk,
Rubs whiskers on my pen,
Prods hives of bills,
Hunkers on my prose.

Food sounds from sink bring her.
She skirls by my leg,
Does dish runs, spieling hunger.
No bird, she wolfs her food.

From indoor sill she reviews
Greenless premises, dog spooed —
World beyond her window
Where she will never go.

—Note on form: A lipogram is verse written without using one or more letters of the alphabet. In “Fells New York” the letters omitted are C, A and T.

Dragon-mania

The one thing Sam wanted for Christmas was “a Legomaniac dragon.” A clerk, somewhat archly, would inform me that the term “Legomaniac” refers to the boy, not the toy.

It turned out that I had not one but two. Sam did receive a small box with a beast of emerald with detachable red flame. plus a horse-drawn and knight-guarded cart, a “dragon wagon,” to transport it to wherever captive chimeras are stored.

No sooner was it built than Zack, age two, also became a dragon devotee.

Once his small hand closed on the rigid prize, no dinosaur nor even Gummy Worms would bribe it loose. Just rivalry, I thought. But next day at the playground on a bench Zack found a Chinese version, soft as yin, all jiggly fringe and undulating coils. He clung to it all morning like a wand (under the owner’s anxious eye) until he had to leave its powers in the sand.



It made me wonder where dragons came from,
what psychic cave birthed them to play roles
of such polarity: in Christian lore
an evil foe, in Asia the benign
bringer of good luck and prosperity.
I wonder if the diplomats, experts
in trade negotiations, human rights
and all the other barriers that dog
East-West discourse might well devote some time
to this fundamental dichotomy
at a dragon summit, where they may find
the arch-fiend is a mere chameleon.



Lascaux II: The Animals

While we sit on a bench waiting, our guide
Corrects our misconceptions: the Cro-Magnons
Did not live in the caves, but on ledges.
They did not hunt the animals they painted:
Their garbage pits are full of reindeer bones.
What, we wonder, did they paint — and why?

Going in, we meet the “unicorn,”
whose feline forehead sprouts a pair of horns
like spars, above a body composite
of bear, rhinoceros and ocelot.
It looked to me like someone having fun.
The “Salle des Taureaux,” is truly the domaine
of mighty bulls (called aurochs by our guide)
the size of semi’s, but hardly fearsome:
two facing off wear smiles on freckled faces,
while between them prance some deer
whose snaky antlers twine and branch
into a dozen points. Two even larger bulls
on the wall opposite, a black bear
and a red bison squeezed between them,
are over-painted with an ochre cow and calf
racing in irreverent exuberance
as if fleeing the stampede behind.

For now we enter horse country, indeed! First come the “Chinese horses,” whose small heads, large bodies and short legs evoke steeds from the Ming dynasty. A string of five “ponies” in varied decors suggest a kids’ coloring contest. Finally three full-size horses contemplate with equanimity the big surprise: the “upside-down” horse, falling tail-first, ears back in fear into a crevasse, the scene dictated by the shape of the rock “canvas.” Ingenuity, invention and experimentation abound upon these walls, but most of all (or so it seems to me) the sense of play.

