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## Shamanic Origin of Poetry: The Deep Magic of Saying

When we go back into the origins of poetry, we discover the deep magic of Saying, of calling into Being through our careful, musical relationship to language.

When we write with an awareness of these roots, our writing ratchets up many notches.

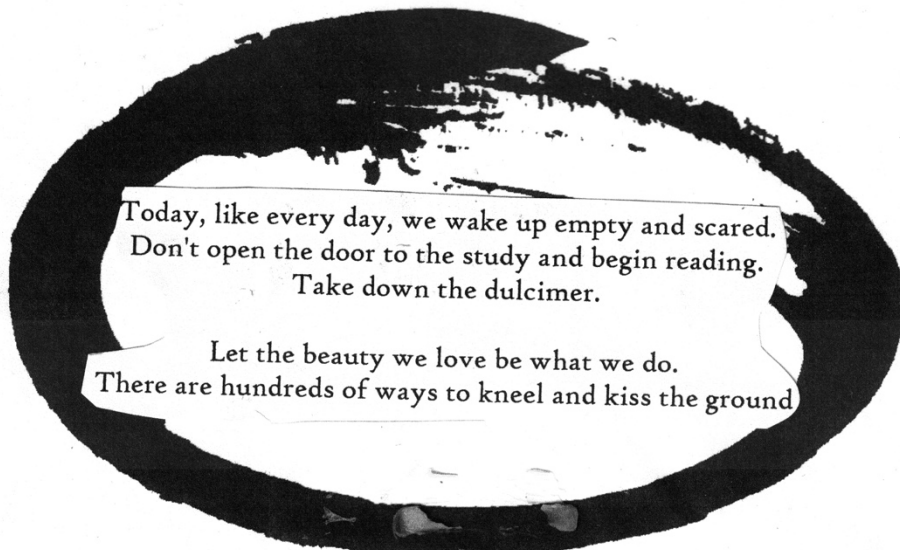
Some of my resources here are Jerome Rothenberg's superb collections, *Technicians of the Sacred*, and *Shaking the Pumpkin Gourd*, as well as source texts, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*, by Diane Wolkstein, Samuel Noah Kramer, and *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now*, by Aliko and Willis Barnstone.

The depth and complexity of early poetry is no way "primitive" .... but rather formative. Language, poetry, culture, and a richly developed sense of the Numinous all grew up together... profound bedfellows that provide us inspiring and intricate foundations for our explorations into making poems today. Onward!

### MAGIC WORDS

In the very earliest time,  
when both people and animals lived on earth,  
a person could become an animal if he wanted to  
and an animal could become a human being.  
Sometimes they were people  
and sometimes animals  
and there was no difference.  
All spoke the same language.  
That was the time when words were like magic.  
The human mind had mysterious powers.  
A word spoken by chance  
might have strange consequences.  
It would suddenly come alive  
and what people wanted to happen could happen—  
all you had to do was say it.  
Nobody can explain this:  
That's the way it was.

after NALUNGIAQ



Today, like every day, we wake up empty and scared.  
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.  
Take down the dulcimer.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground

Step out onto the Planet.  
Draw a circle a hundred feet round.

Inside the circle are  
300 things nobody understands, and, maybe  
nobody's ever really seen.

How many can you find?

## NAMING EVENTS

*Papago*

1. A shaman has a dream & names a child for what he dreams in it. Among such names are Circling Light, Rushing Light Beams, Daylight Comes, Wind Rainbow, Wind Leaves, Rainbow Shaman, Feather Leaves, A-Rainbow-as-a-Bow, Shining Beetle, Singing Dawn, Hawk-Flying-over-Water-Holes, Flowers Trembling, Chief-of-Jackrabbits, Water-Drops-on-Leaves, Short Wings, Leaf Blossoms, Foamy Water.
2. A person receives a name describing something odd about him, always on the bad side. Such names include: Grasshopper-Ate-His-Arrow, Gambler, Ass-Side-to-the-Fire, Panis-Fall-Down, Blisters, Fish-Smell-Mouth, Bed Wetter, Rat Ear, Yellow Legs.
3. A person receives a name describing something odd & sexual about the namer. Here the namer is a woman or a transvestite, who makes the name public by shouting it after the man named when others are present. The man invariably accepts it & is regularly called by it, even by his wife & family. Such names include: Down-Dangling-Pussy-Hairs, Big Cunt, Long Asshole.
4. A group of namers gathers around a dead enemy & shouts abusive names at the body. These names are then given to the shouters. They include: Long Bones, Full-of-Dirt, Back-of-a-Wildcat, Yellow Face, & Gold Breasts, the latter spoken of a girl.
5. A person buys a name or trades names with another person. For example, Devil-Old-Man exchanges names with Contrary, or Looking-for-Girls-at-a-Dance changes with Big Crazy, but has to give him four pints of whiskey in addition because of the desirability of the name.

## GIFT EVENT

*Kwakiutl*

- Start by giving away different colored glass bowls.  
Have everyone give everyone else a glass bowl.  
Give away handkerchiefs & soap & things like that.  
Give away a sack of clams & a roll of toilet paper.  
Give away teddybear candies, apples, suckers & oranges.  
Give away pigs & geese & chickens, or pretend to do so.  
Pretend to be different things.  
Have the women pretend to be crows, have the men pretend to be something else.  
Talk Chinese or something.  
Make a narrow place at the entrance of a house & put a line at the end of it that you have to stoop under to get in.  
Hang the line with all sorts of pots & pans to make a big noise.  
Give away frying pans while saying things like "Here is this frying pan worth \$100 & this one worth \$200."  
Give everyone a new name.  
Give a name to a grandchild or think of something & go & get everything.

## DREAM EVENT I

*Iroquois*

After having a dream, let someone else guess what it was. Then have everyone act it out together.

## DREAM EVENT II

*Iroquois*

Have participants run around the center of a village, acting out their dreams & demanding that others guess & satisfy them.

## VISION EVENT I

*Eskimo*

Go to a lonely place & rub a stone in a circle on a rock for hours & days on end.

## VISION EVENT II

*Eskimo*

Let the person who wants a vision hang himself by his neck. When his face turns purple, take him down & have him describe what he's seen.

## VISION EVENT III

*Sioux*

Go to a mountaintop & cry for a vision.

## LANGUAGE EVENT

*Navajo*

Hold a conversation in which everything refers to water.  
If somebody comes in the room, say: "Someone's floating in."  
If somebody sits down, say: "It looks like someone just stopped floating."

## CRAZY DOG EVENTS

*Crow*

1. Act like a crazy dog. Wear sashes & other fine clothes, carry a rattle, & dance along the roads singing crazy dog songs after every/body else has gone to bed.
2. Talk crosswise: say the opposite of what you mean & make others say the opposite of what they mean in return.
3. Fight like a fool by rushing up to an enemy & offering to be killed. Dig a hole near an enemy, & when the enemy surrounds it, leap out at them & drive them back.
4. Paint yourself white, mount a white horse, cover its eyes & make it jump down a steep & rocky bank, until both of you are crushed.

## BUTTERFLY SONG EVENT

*Maricopa*

A circular, roofless enclosure of willow poles is built, walled in with leafy branches. Across the top runs a series of parallel strings along which many yellow butterflies, cut out of mountain-sheep skin, are hanging. A singer sits at the center of the enclosure. As he sings he beats on an inverted basket with one hand, scraping a stick a foot long on it with the other. This makes the butterflies look as though they were fluttering, dancing in time to his tune.

### Gift Event

**Fill blue glass bottles with sparkling water and watch the air travel for 3 timed minutes.**

**Give everyone brooms and new shoes to match.**

**Cook a pot of beans from the last harvest and give it to the first person you see.**

**Don't take no for an answer.**

**Calibrate the distance from your elbow to the tip of your middle finger in inches.**

**Write that many Love letters to the Invisible.**

**Stand outside near water and memorize a way to move like a river exactly.**

**Don't give up until you are downstream of yourself.**

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### Ritual for the Wild Love Moon

1. Know what is shining.
2. Name it.
3. Compose a letter to that light.
4. Address an envelope to the Ripe, the Seeded One, Voluptuous Olive, and mail with a blue stamp.
5. Plant seeds of round fruits.
6. Make a white corn tortilla.
7. Know what comes over you so suddenly.
8. Write sorrow, eggplant, sacred jimson, on your left palm, and clap 3 times.
9. Cover all the mirrors with green silk and honeysuckle vine.
10. Eat the tortilla.

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## YEMAYA

*Do not be afraid to visit me in the depths.*

Yemaya is the West African Creation Goddess often depicted as a mermaid, she is associated with the moon, the oceans and female mysteries. Her colors are blue, silver, white. She is also associated with crystal, pearl, mother-of-pearl, coral, conch shell, and the stars. There are Feast Days associated with her, among them June 22, and she favors the flowers of the water, like trout lily or sea lavender. She rules the conception and birth of children and ensures their safety during childhood. Yemaya was raped by her son. Yemaya's curse of her son during this violent incestuous act caused his death, whereupon she chose to die upon a mountain peak. As she died, her womb spilled forth the fourteen Yoruban Gods and Goddesses, and the breaking of her uterine waters caused the great flood which created the oceans. From her bones the first human woman and man were born. Yemaya brings forth life even during the worst atrocities that can be suffered by anyone, thus ensuring the continuity of life. She demonstrates the strength of the life force even in the darkest of times. Because of these life-sustaining qualities, the Africans sold into slavery brought their worship of Yemaya, the great sustainer and comforter, along with them in their new bondage as slaves. Efforts to break very bad luck may be dedicated to Yemaya the mother, whose children are the fish. By entering a body of water, like a lake or the sea, a person may pour sugar water or syrup in a circle around themselves, then dropping seven pennies in the water as an offering to Yemaya ask her blessing. Upon leaving the water, a person must tear their old (and now wet) clothing and leave them at the beach having dressed in some new clothing in the colors of Yemaya which are blue and white. It is said that this blessing crossings and dispel all bad luck associated with it. Her eleke is made of transparent crystal beads alternating with royal blue ones, in a pattern of seven, which is her number. Her day is Saturday, she likes verbena perfume.

## MARRIAGE EVENT

for *Carolee Schneemann*

- (1) Large quantities of food & cloth are piled in a heap.
- (2) The Bridegroom appears outside his own house, where a continuous stream of human bodies leads from his doorway to that of his Father-in-Law.
- (3) As many people as there are permit him to walk over their backs as they lie prostrate on the ground.\*
- (4) When the Bridegroom reaches the Father-in-Law's house, three old women prostrate themselves so as to form a living chair for him.
- (5) A fish is brought forward &, with the aid of a sharp stick, is cut up & diced on a human body. It is presented to the Bridegroom who eats it raw.
- (6) The piles of food & cloth are distributed to as many people as there are, & the food is eaten. Afterwards the street of human bodies is again formed for the return.
- (7) The Bridegroom's family perform the same event for the bride.

(Polynesia: Hervey Islands)

\* Should the numbers be insufficient to reach the Father-in-Law's house, those first walked-on rise up quickly & run through the crowd, again to take their places in front.

## GIFT EVENT I

Bestow a gift on someone, to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift after a lapse of time. Let as much as a year or more elapse between payments.

(New Guinea: Trobriand Islands)

## GIFT EVENT II

Start by giving away different colored glass bowls.  
Have everyone give everyone else a glass bowl.  
Give away handkerchiefs and soap and things like that.  
Give away a sack of clams and a roll of toilet paper.  
Give away teddybear candies, apples, suckers and oranges.  
Give away pigs and geese and chickens, or pretend to do so.  
Pretend to be different things.  
Have the women pretend to be crows, have the men pretend to be something else.  
Talk Chinese or something.  
Make a narrow place at the entrance of a house and put a line at the end of it that you have to stoop under to get in.  
Hang the line with all sorts of pots and pans to make a big noise.  
Give away frying pans while saying things like "Here is this frying pan worth \$100 and this one worth \$200."  
Give everyone a new name.  
Give a name to a grandchild or think of something and go and get everything.

(Kwakiutl Indian)

Sometimes I go about pitying myself,  
and all the time  
I am being carried on great winds across the sky.

Ojibway  
adapted by Robert Bly  
from the translation of Frances Densmore

### LANGUAGE EVENT III

All parts of a hut are named, and the names have references to the sexual relations between man and woman.

Question. What is the doorstep?

Answer. The doorstep is a woman.

Q. And the crossbar over the door, what is that?

A. The crossbar is a man.

Q. When the door is being put in, what is that?

A. That is when the man comes.

Q. And the hinge-pin on the door?

A. His penis.

Q. What is the ceiling of the hut and the floor beneath?

A. A boy and a girl who are mating.

Q. And the grass bundles hanging down above them?

A. The python.

Q. Then what is the beaten floor?

A. That is my aunt.

Q. Who has been beating the floor then?

A. A hand.

Q. But what is the door?

A. The door is the crocodile.

Q. And if the door is closed, what is that?

A. The crocodile stretching out.

Q. What is the door from the outside?

A. The crocodile's back.

Q. And if that one is closed?

A. A pregnant woman.

Q. Then what is a door that is open?

A. The woman after delivery.

Q. What are the two sides of the river?

A. A boy and a girl when they meet.

Q. But which one is the crocodile that bites?

A. That is the top one, the one below has no sense.

Q. What is the wall in front of you?

A. A man that is virile.

Q. And the wall behind you?

A. A man who is impotent.

Q. Then what is this housepost?

A. A man who rips a girl apart.

Q. And that one?

A. The striker of the thighs, the crusher of the little ribs

(Africa: Venda)

### LILY EVENTS

(1) A man and woman looking for lilies.

(2) All the people going down to look for lilies.

(3) Mud taken up looking for lilies.

(4) Washing the lilies in the water to remove the mud.

(5) Washing themselves off after the mud has got on them.

(6) Lilies in a basket.

(7) Walking from the lily place "to go look for a dry place to sit down."

(Australia: Arnhem Land)

### DEATH SONG

by Juana Manwell (Owl Woman)

In the great night my heart will go out  
Toward me the darkness comes rattling  
In the great night my heart will go out

(Papago Indian)

THREE NAHUATL POEMS

I offer flowers. I sow flower seeds. I plant flowers. I assemble flowers. I pick flowers. I pick different flowers. I remove flowers. I seek flowers. I offer flowers. I arrange flowers. I thread a flower. I string flowers. I make flowers. I form them to be extending, uneven, rounded, round bouquets of flowers.

I make a flower necklace, a flower garland, a paper of flowers, a bouquet, a flower shield, hand flowers. I thread them. I string them. I provide them with grass. I provide them with leaves. I make a pendant of them. I smell something. I smell them. I cause one to smell something. I cause him to smell. I offer flowers to one. I offer him flowers. I provide him with flowers. I provide one with flowers. I place a necklace. I provide him with a flower necklace. I place a garland on one. I provide him a garland. I clothe one in flowers. I clothe him in flowers. I cover one with flowers. I cover him with flowers. I destroy one with flowers. I destroy him with flowers. I injure one with flowers. I injure him with flowers.

*I destroy one with flowers; I destroy him with flowers; I injure one with flowers: with drink, with food, with flowers, with tobacco, with capes, with gold. I beguile, I incite him with flowers, with words; I beguile him, I say, "I caress him with flowers. I seduce one. I extend one a lengthy discourse. I induce him with words."*

I provide one with flowers. I make flowers, or I give them to one that someone will observe a feastday. Or I merely continue to give one flowers; I continue to place them in one's hand, I continue to offer them to one's hands. Or I provide one with a necklace, or I provide one with a garland of flowers.

(Aztec)

1  
One by one I proclaim your songs:  
I bind them on gold crabs as if they were anklets:  
like emeralds I gather them.  
Clothe yourself in them: they are your riches.  
Bathe in feathers of the quetzal,  
your treasury of birds' plumes black and yellow,  
the red feathers of the macaw  
beat your drums about the world:  
deck yourself out in them: they are your riches.

2  
Where am I to go, whither?  
The road's there, the road to Two-Gods.  
Well, who checks men here,  
here where all lack a body,  
at the bottom of the sky?  
Or, maybe, it is only on Earth  
that we lose the body?  
Cleaned out, rid of it completely . . .  
His House: there remains none on this earth!  
Who is it that said:  
Where find them? our friends no longer exist!

3  
Will he return will Prince Cuauhtli ever return?  
Will Ayocuan, the one who drove an arrow into the sky?  
Shall these two yet gladden you?  
Events don't recur: we vanish once only.

Hence the cause of my weeping:  
Prince Ayocuan, warrior chief  
governed us harshly.  
His pride waxed more, he grew haughty  
here among men.  
But his time is finished . . .  
he can no longer come to bow down before Father and  
Mother . . .  
This is the reason for my weeping:  
He has fled to the place where all lack a body!

(Aztec)

*Aztec*

Oh, golden flower opened up  
 whose thighs are holy  
 She came from Tamoanchan,  
 where all descended  
 Oh, golden flower flowered  
 whose thighs are holy  
 She came from Tamoanchan  
 Oh, white flower opened up  
 whose thighs are holy  
 She came from Tamoanchan,  
 where all descended  
 Oh, white flower flowered  
 whose thighs are holy  
 She came from Tamoanchan.  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 She lights on the round cactus,  
 the dark obsidian butterfly.  
 across the Nine Plains,  
 she fed herself with deers' hearts.

She is our mother,  
 in plumage  
 In all four directions of wind  
 They saw you as a deer  
 those two men, Xiuhnel and Minich.  
 She is dressed  
 the goddess earth.  
 she is smeared with clay.  
 the arrows are broken.  
 in the barren land.

— English version by Edward Kissam

poem to ease birth

*Aztec*

in the house with the tortoise chair  
 she will give birth to the pearl  
 to the beautiful feather  
 in the house of the goddess who sits on a tortoise  
 she will give birth to the necklace of pearls  
 to the beautiful feathers we are  
 there she sits on the tortoise  
 swelling to give us birth  
 on your way on your way  
 child be on your way to me here  
 you whom I made new  
 come here child come be pearl  
 be beautiful feather

— English version by Anselm Hollo

THE ARTIST

*Aztec*

The artist: disciple, abundant, multiple, restless.  
 The true artist: capable, practicing, skillful;  
 maintains dialogue with his heart, meets things with his mind.  
 The true artist: draws out all from his heart,  
 works with delight, makes things with calm, with sagacity,  
 works like a true Toltec, composes his objects, works dexterously, invents;  
 arranges materials, adorns them, makes them adjust.  
 The carrion artist: works at random, sneers at the people,  
 makes things opaque, brushes across the surface of the face of things,  
 works without care, defrauds people, is a thief.

— English version by Denise Levertov

FOR TLACAHUEPAN

The field where the hero's  
 body was left in the sun  
 A sudden ringing of bells  
 And yellow flowers  
 to sweeten  
 the kingdom of death  
 They have hidden you here  
 in the seven caves  
 The acacia bursts, a  
 lost cry of the tiger  
 answers the eagle's call  
 O quechol-bird  
 color of fire  
 moving at night  
 through this field  
 in the kingdom of death

(Aztec)

BEAN FLOWER

Bean flower,  
 Black & white  
 Like the heart of that dark man  
 Who loves two women.  
 Long live the apple.  
 Its tears are sweet.  
 This world has reason  
 To be bitter.  
 Little star of heaven  
 Lend me your brightness,  
 For the life of this world  
 Is a dark night.

(Quechua)

## GENESIS I

Water went they say. Land was not they say. Water only then, mountains were not, they say. Stones were not they say. Fish were not they say. Deer were not they say. Grizzlies were not they say. Panthers were not they say. Wolves were not they say. People were washed away they say. Grizzlies were washed away they say. Panthers were washed away they say. Deer were washed away they say. Coyotes were not then they say. Ravens were not they say. Herons were not they say. Woodpeckers were not they say. Then wrens were not they say. Then hummingbirds were not they say. Then otters were not they say. Then jack-rabbits, grey squirrels were not they say. Then long-eared mice were not they say. Then wind was not they say. Then snow was not they say. Then rain was not they say. Then it didn't thunder they say. Then trees were not when it didn't thunder they say. It didn't lighten they say. Then clouds were not they say. Fog was not they say. It didn't appear they say. Stars were not they say. It was very dark.

(Kato Indian)

## THE STARS

For we are the stars. For we sing.  
For we sing with our light.  
For we are birds made of fire.  
For we spread our wings over the sky.  
Our light is a voice.  
We cut a road for the soul  
for its journey through death.  
For three of our number are hunters.  
For these three hunt a bear.  
For there never yet was a time  
when these three didn't hunt.  
For we face the hills with disdain.  
This is the song of the stars.

(Passamaquoddy Indian)

## AZTEC DEFINITIONS

### *Ruby-Throated Hummingbird*

It is ashen, ash colored. At the top of its head & the throat, its feathers are flaming, like fire. They glisten, they glow.

### *Amoyotl (a water-strider)*

It is like a fly, small & round. It has legs, it has wings; it is dry. It goes on the surface of the water; it is a flyer. It buzzes, it sings.

### *Bitumen (a shellfish)*

It falls out on the ocean shore; it falls out like mud.

### *Little Blue Heron*

It resembles the brown crane in color; it is ashen, grey. It smells like fish, rotten fish, stinking fish. It smells of fish, rotten fish.

### *Seashell*

It is white. One is large, one is small. It is spiraled, marvelous. It is that which can be blown, which resounds. I blow the seashell. I improve, I polish the seashell.

### *A Mushroom*

It is round, large, like a severed head.

### *The Avocado Tree*

The leaves, the foliage are brown. Its fruit is black, dark; it shines. Within, it is herb-green. Its base is thin, the top rounded, round. It is oily; it has moisture; it has a center.

# THE CALENDARS

## Ojibwa

1. long moon, spirit moon 2. moon of the suckers 3. moon of the crust on the snow 4. moon of the breaking of snow-shoes 5. moon of the flowers & blooms 6. moon of strawberries 7. moon of raspberries 8. moon of the whortle berries 9. moon of gathering of wild rice 10. moon of the falling of leaves 11. moon of freezing 12. little moon of the spirit

## Mandan

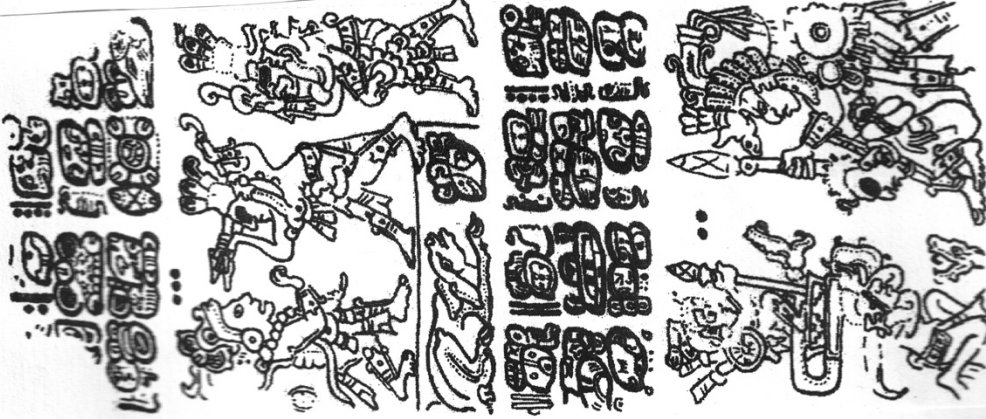
1. moon of the seven cold days 2. pairing moon 3. moon of the weak eyes 4. moon of the wild geese / moon of the breaking up of the ice 5. moon in which maize is sown / moon of flowers 6. moon of ripe service berries 7. moon of ripe cherries 8. moon of ripe wild plums 9. moon of ripe maize 10. moon of the fall of the leaves 11. moon of the freezing of the rivers 12. moon of the little cold

## Natchilli

1. it is cold, the Eskimo is freezing 2. the sun is returning 3. the sun is ascending 4. the seal brings forth her young 5. the young seals are taking to the sea 6. the seals are shedding their coats 7. reindeer bring forth their young / birds are brooding 8. the young birds are hatched 9. the reindeer is migrating southward 10. amerairui 11. the Eskimo lay down food depots 12. the sun disappears

## Dakota

1. hard moon 2. racoon moon 3. sore eyes moon 4. moon in which the geese lay eggs / moon in which the streams are again navigable 5. planting moon 6. moon in which the strawberries are red 7. moon in which the chokecherries are ripe & the geese shed their feathers 8. harvest moon 9. moon in which wild rice is laid up to dry 10. drying rice moon 11. deer rutting moon 12. moon when deer shed horns



## OCEANIA

### THE POETICS OF HUNGER

1  
 Trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger-swollen belly, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger exhaustion, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger faintness, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger prostration, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger depression, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger drooping, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The hunger famine, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The utter famine, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 The drooping famine, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the house, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the earth oven, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the hearth-stones, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the foundation-beams, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the rafters, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the ridge pole, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the front frame of my thatch, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 store  
 Round the shelves of my house, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the threshold boards of my house, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 restore  
 Round the ground fronting my house, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 restore  
 Round the central place, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the beaten soil, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round where the road starts, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the roads themselves, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the sea shore, trumpet shell, restore, restore

Round the low-water mark, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Round the shallow water, trumpet shell, restore, restore  
 Restore this way, restore that way

### TO THE GOD OF FIRE AS A HORSE

Your eyes do not make mistakes,  
Your eyes have the sun's seeing,  
Your thought marches terribly in the night  
blazing with light & the fire  
breaks from your throat as you whinny in battle.

This fire was born in a pleasant forest  
This fire lives in ecstasy somewhere in the night.

His march is a dagger of fire

His body is enormous

His mouth opens & closes as he champs on the world

He swings the axe-edge of his tongue

smelting & refining the raw wood he chops down.

He gets ready to shoot & fits arrow to bowstring

He hones his light to a fine edge on the steel

He travels through night with rapid & various movements

His thighs are rich with movement.

He is a bird that settles on a tree.

(India)

Wake up, woman

Rise up, woman

In the middle of the street

A dog howls

May the death arrive

May the dance arrive

Comes the dance

You must dance

Comes the death

You can't help it!

Ah! what a chill

Ah! what a wind

(Ayacucho Indian)

### TO THE GOD OF FIRE

He hides himself like a thief in the hidden cave  
in darkness with the cow of vision.  
It is to him we always surrender:  
he carries our surrender with him.

His movements are the law of the working of truth  
He circles the world & the sea swells him up with its song:  
the flame of truth burns in the heart of water.

He is earth & the wide fields we grow festive in,  
The pleasure of running water, the hill we climb,  
The clean air at its peak from which we watch  
Invincible horses gallop along unbroken rivers that he runs  
beside.

And he eats the forests of earth:

The wind breathes him out & he perches in the branches

And he scorches the hair of earth's body with his flame.

And he breathes on the water like a gull in the trough of  
the wave,

And he wakes at daybreak to begin the recitation of the word,

And he is like a god of wine & like a white cow with her calf,

And he spreads out over the world,

and his light can be seen very far.

(India)

### A PERUVIAN DANCE SONG

## CORRESPONDENCES

### from *The Book of Changes*

The Creative is heaven. It is round, it is the prince, the father, jade, metal, cold, ice; it is deep red, a good horse, an old horse, a lean horse, a wild horse, tree fruit.

The Receptive is the earth, the mother. It is cloth, a kettle, frugality, it is level, it is a cow with a calf, a large wagon, form, the multitude, a shaft. Among the various kinds of soil, it is the black.

The Arousing is thunder, the dragon. It is dark yellow, it is a spreading out, a great road, the eldest son. It is decisive & vehement; it is bamboo that is green & young, it is reed & rush.

Among horses it signifies those which can neigh well, those with white hind legs, those which gallop, those with a star on the forehead.

Among useful plants it is the pod-bearing ones. Finally, it is the strong, that which grows luxuriantly.

The Gentle is wood, wind, the eldest daughter, the guideline, work; it is the white, the long, the high; it is advance & retreat, the undecided, odor.

Among men it means the gray-haired; it means those with broad foreheads; it means those with much white in their eyes; it means those close to gain, so that in the market they get threefold value. Finally, it is the sign of vehemence.

The Abyssal is water, ditches, ambush, bending & straightening out, bow & wheel.

Among men it means the melancholy, those with sick hearts, with carache.

It is the blood sign; it is red.

Among horses it means those with beautiful backs, those with wild courage, those which let their heads hang, those with thin hoofs, those which stumble.

Among chariots it means those with many defects.

It is penetration, the moon.

It means thieves.

Among varieties of wood it means those which are firm & have much pith.

The Clinging is fire, the sun, lightning, the middle daughter.

It means coats of mail & helmets; it means lances & weapons. Among men it means the big-bellied.

It is the sign of dryness. It means the tortoise, the crab, the snail, the mussel, the hawkbill tortoise.

Among trees it means those which dry out in the upper part of the trunk.

Keeping Still is the mountain; it is a bypath; it means little stones, doors & openings, fruits & seeds, eunuchs & watchmen, the fingers; it is the dog, the rat, & the various kinds of black-billed birds.

Among trees it signifies the firm & gnarled.

The Joyous is the lake, the youngest daughter; it is a sorceress; it is mouth & tongue. It means smashing & breaking apart; it means dropping off & bursting open. Among the kinds of soil it is the hard & salty. It is the concubine. It is the sheep.

Arround 900 肆 (China)

*from Song of Songs (The Shulamite)*

I

The voice of my darling  
comes. O hear him  
leaping on the mountains,  
dancing on the hills!  
My love is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.  
Here he is standing  
behind our wall,  
gazing from the window,  
peering through the grille.  
My love answers and speaks to me:  
"Rise, my love, my beauty,  
and come away.  
Winter is past,

the rains are over and gone.  
Flowers appear on the land,  
the time of the nightingale has come.  
The voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.

The fig tree is heavy with small green figs,  
and grapevines are in bloom,  
pouring out fragrance.  
Rise, my love, my beauty,  
and come away.  
My dove, you are in the crevices of the rock,  
in the recess of the cliffs.  
Let me see your face,  
let me hear your voice,  
for sweet is your voice  
and your face is beautiful."

old Testament  
poss. 10-2nd Century  
BCE

II

In my bed at night  
I looked for him whom my soul loves  
and could not find him.  
"I will rise and wander in the city,  
in the streets and marketplaces  
I will look for him whom my soul loves,"  
yet I could not find him.  
The watchmen who go about the city  
found me. I said:  
"Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"  
I barely left them  
when I found him whom my soul loves.  
I seized him and would not let him go  
until I took him to my mother's house,  
to the room of her who conceived me.

O daughters of Jerusalem,  
I have made you swear  
by the gazelles and by the deer of the hills  
not to wake, not to wake my love  
before the hour is ripe.

III

I sleep but my heart is awake,  
my lover's voice is knocking:  
"Open, let me in, my sister, my darling,  
my dove, my perfect one,  
for my head is filled with dew,  
my hair is wet with drops of night."

I have taken off my garments.  
How can I put them on?  
I have washed my feet.  
How can I dirty them now?  
My lover's hand showed at the door  
and in me I burned for him.  
I rose to open to my love,  
my hands dripped with myrrh,  
my fingers with myrrh flowing  
over the handle of the bolt.  
I opened to my love

When he spoke my soul had vanished.  
I looked for him and could not find him.  
I called. He did not answer.  
The watchmen who go about the city  
found me.

They beat me, they wounded me,  
they stripped me of my mantle,  
those guardians of the walls!

I beg you, daughters of Jerusalem,  
if you find my love  
what will you tell him?  
Say I am sick with love.

IV

My love has gone down to his garden,  
to the bed of spices,  
to feed his sheep in the orchards,

to gather lilies,

I am my lover's and my lover is mine.  
He feeds his flock among the lilies.

V

I am my lover's and he desires me.  
Come, my darling,  
let us go out into the fields  
and spend the night in villages.

Let us wake early and go to the vineyards  
and see if the vine is in blossom,  
if the new grape bud is open  
and the pomegranates in bloom.

There I will give you my love.  
The mandrakes will spray aroma  
and over our door will be precious fruit,  
new and old,  
which I have saved for you, my darling.

VI

Set me as a seal on your heart,  
as a seal on your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy is cruel as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a flame of God.

Many waters cannot drown it.  
If a man measured love  
by all the wealth of his house,  
he would be utterly scorned.

VII

My love is white and ruddy,  
one in ten thousand.  
His head is like the finest gold,  
his locks are wavy palm leaves,  
black as a raven.

His eyes, doves by the small rivers;  
bathed in milk  
they are deeply set.  
His cheeks are a bed of spices  
fragrant.

His lips are lilies  
dripping myrrh.  
His arms are round gold  
wet with beryl.  
His belly is bright ivory  
starred with sapphires.  
His thighs are pillars of marble  
in sockets of fine gold.  
His appearance is like Lebanon,  
excellent as the cedars.

His mouth is sweet,  
all of him is pleasant.  
This is my love and this is my friend,  
O daughters of Jerusalem.

## *Enbeduanna*

Enbeduanna (born ca. 2300 B.C.). Enbeduanna was a moon priestess, the daughter of King Sargon of Agade (2334–2279 B.C.) who reigned over the world's first empire, extending from the Mediterranean to Persia. Sargon is the first important leader to emerge from the half-light of prehistory into the full light of a written record; words attributed to him are recorded on cuneiform tablets from the early first millennium: "My priestly mother conceived me; secretly brought me to birth; set me in an ark of bulrushes; made fast my door with pitch. She consigned me to the river, which did not overwhelm me. The river brought me to Akki, the farmer, who brought me up to be his son. . . . During my gardenings, the goddess Ishtar loved me, and for fifty-four years the kingship was mine." The detailed quality of this personal account also characterizes the writing of his daughter Enbeduanna, who is the first writer, male or female, in history whose name and work have been preserved. Her personal history survives in highly politicized poems, which in their cosmic vision and ethical outrage recall Isaiah. In her poems to the Sumerian goddess of love Inanna, she speaks to a deity who has descended to earth as an ally, as a friend to help her in her need. In the poems' sensuality, surprising metaphors, and intimacy, they recall Sappho's poems to her ally Aphrodite. We have a stone disk which contains a detailed likeness of the high priestess, revealing her particular features and dress, flanked by three of her retainers. The poems presented here, preserved on cuneiform tablets, are from a sequence of 18 stanzas in a single poem, "The Exaltation of Enbeduanna," addressed to Inanna. In addition we have forty-two hymns to temples whose authorship is not in question, as well as many other poems and fragments which may be hers.

### **Inanna and the Divine Essences**

Lady of all the essences, full light,  
good woman clothed in radiance  
whom heaven and earth love,  
temple friend of An,  
you wear great ornaments,  
you desire the tiara of the high priestess  
whose hand holds the seven essences.  
O my lady, guardian of all the great essences,  
you have picked them up and hung them  
on your hand.  
You have gathered the holy essences and worn them  
tightly on your breasts.

When we come before you,  
terrified, shuddering in your stormy clear light,  
we receive justice.  
We sing, mourn, and cry before you  
and walk toward you along a path  
from the house of enormous sighs.

### **Inanna and Ishkur**

You strike everything down in battle.  
O my lady, on your wings  
you hack away the land and charge disguised  
as a charging storm,  
roar as a roaring storm,  
thunder and keep thundering, and snort  
with evil winds.  
Your feet are filled with restlessness.

On your harp of sighs  
I hear your dirge.

### **Inanna and the Anunna**

O my lady, the Anunna, the great gods,  
flutter like bats in front of you,  
fly away into cliffs.

They do not have the courage to walk  
through your terrible gaze.

Who can tame your furious heart?  
No lesser god.

Your malevolent heart is beyond temperance.  
Lady, you soothe the reins of the beast,  
you make us happy.

Your rage is beyond temperance,  
O eldest daughter of Suen!

Who has ever denied you homage,  
lady, supreme over the land?

### **Inanna and An**

Like a dragon you have filled the land  
with venom.

Like thunder when you roar over the earth,  
trees and plants fall before you.

You are a flood descending from a mountain,  
O primary one,

moon goddess Inanna of heaven and earth!  
Your fire blows about and drops on our nation.

Lady mounted on a beast,  
An gives you qualities, holy commands,  
and you decide.

You are in all our great rites.  
Who can understand you?

### **Inanna and Enlil**

Storms lend you wings, destroyer of the lands.  
Loved by Enlil, you fly over our nation.

You serve the decrees of An.  
O my lady, on hearing your sound,  
hills and flatlands bow.

INANNA, QUEEN OF HEAVEN & EARTH  
 STORIES & HYMNS FROM SUMER, 2000 BCE  
 Diane Wolkstein  
 Samuel Noah Kramer  
 FROM THE GREAT ABOVE  
 TO THE GREAT BELOW



She gathered together the seven *me*.  
 She took them into her hands.  
 With the *me* in her possession, she prepared herself:  
 She placed the *ibugurra*, the crown of the steppe, on her head.  
 She arranged the dark locks of hair across her forehead.  
 She tied the small lapis beads around her neck,  
 Let the double strand of beads fall to her breast,  
 And wrapped the royal robe around her body.  
 She daubed her eyes with ointment called "Let him come,  
 Let him come,"  
 Bound the breastplate called "Come, man, come!" around her chest,  
 Slipped the gold ring over her wrist,  
 And took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand.

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.  
 From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.  
 From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.  
 My Lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.  
 Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.  
 She abandoned her office of holy priestess to descend to the underworld.  
 In Uruk she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.  
 In Badtibira she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.  
 In Zabalam she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.  
 In Adab she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.  
 In Nippur she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.  
 In Kish she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.  
 In Akkad she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

Inanna set out for the underworld.  
 Ninshubur, her faithful servant, went with her.  
 Inanna spoke to her, saying:  
 "Ninshubur, my constant support,  
 My *ukkal* who gives me wise advice,  
 My warrior who fights by my side,  
 I am descending to the *kur*, to the underworld.  
 If I do not return,  
 Set up a lament for me by the ruins.  
 Beat the drum for me in the assembly places.  
 Circle the houses of the gods.  
 Tear at your eyes, at your mouth, at your thighs.  
 Dress yourself in a single garment like a beggar.  
 Go to Nippur, to the temple of Enlil.

When you enter his holy shrine, cry out:  
'O Father Enlil, do not let your daughter  
Be put to death in the underworld.  
Do not let your bright silver  
Be covered with the dust of the underworld.  
Do not let your precious lapis  
Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.  
Do not let your fragrant boxwood  
Be cut into wood for the woodworker.  
Do not let the holy priestess of heaven  
Be put to death in the underworld.'

If Enlil will not help you,  
Go to Ur, to the temple of Nanna.  
Weep before Father Nanna.  
If Nanna will not help you,  
Go to Eridu, to the temple of Enki.  
Weep before Father Enki.  
Father Enki, the God of Wisdom, knows the food of life,  
He knows the water of life,  
He knows the secrets.  
Surely he will not let me die."

Inanna continued on her way to the underworld.  
Then she stopped and said:

"Go now, Ninshubur—  
Do not forget the words I have commanded you."

When Inanna arrived at the outer gates of the underworld,  
She knocked loudly.

She cried out in a fierce voice:

"Open the door, gatekeeper!  
Open the door, Neti!  
I alone would enter!"

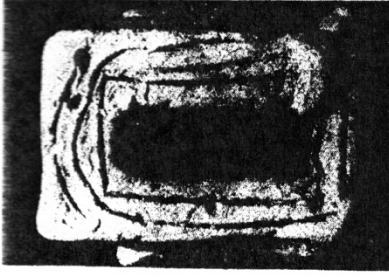
Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the *kur*, asked:  
"Who are you?"

She answered:  
"I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven,  
On my way to the East."

Neti said:  
"If you are truly Inanna, Queen of Heaven,  
On your way to the East,  
Why has your heart led you on the road  
From which no traveler returns?"

Inanna answered:  
"Because . . . of my older sister, Ereshkigal,  
Her husband, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died.  
I have come to witness the funeral rites.  
Let the beer of his funeral rites be poured into the cup.  
Let it be done."

Neti spoke:  
"Stay here, Inanna, I will speak to my queen.  
I will give her your message."



## Greek

### ANCIENT GREEK

#### Sappho

Sappho (7th–6th century B.C.). Born on the island of Lesbos (hence Lesbian) in Eressos or the capital Mytilene. She was married and had a daughter, Kleis, to whom she wrote several poems. Other love poems were written to women friends. In an epigram in the Greek anthology, Plato writes: "Some say nine Muses—but count again./ Behold the tenth: Sappho of Lesbos." From these words attributed to Plato has come the custom of referring to outstanding women poets as the "tenth Muse," a title bestowed on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Louise Labé, Alfonsina Storni, Gabriela Mistral, etc. Sappho was considered the most important lyric poet of Western antiquity. Catullus, writing in sapphics, imitated her forms and addressed his main love poems to Lesbia. It was common for Greek and Latin writers to know the entire canon of Sappho's poems by heart. Her work survived and was constantly recopied until nearly A.D. 1000, when a wrathful church destroyed whatever it could find. In 1073 her writings were publicly burned in Rome and Constantinople by order of Pope Gregory VIII. Most of her poems have survived either as fragments in mutilated papyrus, largely found at Crocodilopolis in the Fayum in Egypt, or in quotations by ancient writers. One poem exists in its entirety, the "Prayer to Aphrodite," in *Literary Composition* by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. An equally famous poem, "To me he seems like a god," has been translated by poets from Catullus to William Carlos Williams. Sappho wrote with accuracy, involvement, and jarring detachment about herself, her friends, and the politics of tyranny and exile.

To me he seems like a god  
as he sits facing you and  
hears you near as you speak  
softly and laugh

All the poems by Sappho, Praxilla, Telesilla, Anyte, and Korinna presented here have been translated by WB and are from his *Greek Lyric Poetry*.

in a sweet echo that jolts  
the heart in my ribs. For now  
as I look at you my voice  
is empty and

can say nothing as my tongue  
cracks and slender fire is quick  
under my skin. My eyes are dead  
to light, my ears

pound, and sweat pours over me:  
I convulse, paler than grass,  
and feel my mind slip as I  
go close to death

[but must suffer all, being poor.]



Come, holy tortoise shell,  
my lyre, and become a poem.



My mother always said  
that in her youth she was  
exceedingly in fashion

wearing a purple ribbon  
looped in her hair. But  
the girl whose hair is yellow

than torchlight need wear no  
colorful ribbons from Sardis—  
but a garland of fresh flowers.



Some say cavalry and others claim  
infantry or a fleet of long oars  
is the supreme sight on the black earth.  
I say it is

Write a poem using sapphic stanzas. The stanza is made of four lines, three identical long(ish) lines and a final short one. The long lines have an alternating pattern of hard and soft (stressed and unstressed) syllables that looks like this:

-uu-uuu-uu

where the dash represents a hard syllable and the *u* a soft one. The fourth and the final syllables are common *u* and can be either hard or soft.

The final line looks like this:

-uuu

You don't have to establish any sort of pattern in the way you choose your common syllables.

This stanza, based on the form that the Greek poet Sappho used, has an interesting transformation into English. Greek prosody used a quantitative system based on how long the sounds of syllables are; we use instead an accentual-syllabic system that counts stressed and unstressed syllables. In English the form seems to produce a wide variety of effects. Each of the lines of the

poem starts off with an emphasis or a boom, and the way you use the rest of your syllables can create comic effects or haunting effects, happy or sad.

William Meredith offers a recent example on a contemporary theme. He works with surprise and irony in the beginning of "Effort at Speech":

Climbing the stairway grey with urban midnight,  
Cheerful, venial, ruminating pleasure,  
Darkness takes me, an arm around my throat and  
*Give me your wallet.*

Fearing cowardice more than other terrors,  
Angry I wrestle with my unseen partner,  
Caught in a ritual not of our own making,  
panting like spaniels.

The rhythm of the fourth line in a Sapphic poem is hauntingly beautiful to me. I always hear it as DAH dah dah *dah* da. A -- 1

## *Shaman Song From a Mayan Pyramid*

by John Gilgun

The sun, having no say in the matter, plunges  
into the jungle.

Heartbeat retreats backward into heartbeat.

Breath retreats backward into breath.

Speech retreats backward into silence.

Silence retreats backward into blackness.

Black hole retreats backward into black hole,  
black water into black water, *cenote* into *cenote*.

*You must become chaos.*

The sun, having no alternative, plummets into the jungle.

The blossom retreats backwards into the bud.

The eye of the scribe retreats backwards into the glyph.

You are retreating into the small soil of your bones.

As the bird retreats into its cry.

As the jungle retreats into its shadow.

As the ants, in their long corridors of Dreamlight,  
retreat backwards into the sun.

The sun, having no choice, vanishes into the jungle.

You, having no choice, vanish into the limestone of  
your bones.

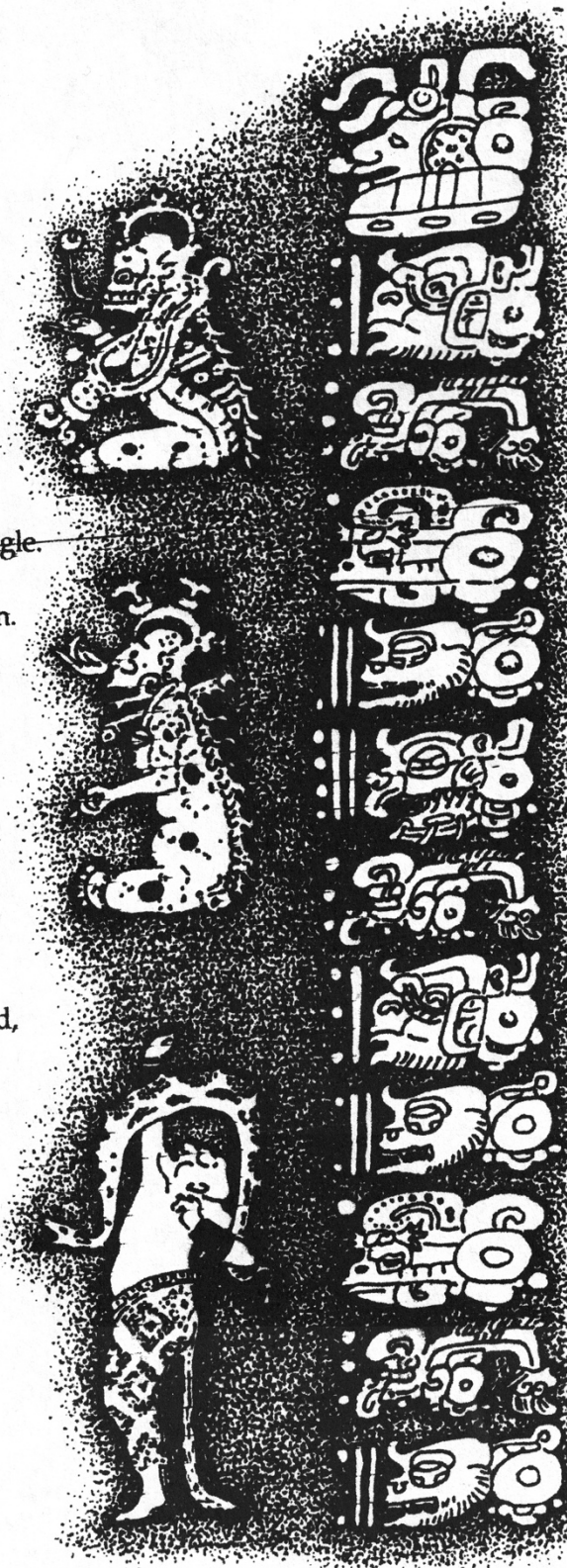
*You must be born again as chaos  
to give birth to a dancing star.*

A jaguar is retreating backwards into the Underworld,  
into Xibalba, the sun in his jaws, the sun  
in his teeth, the sun in his throat, the sun  
in his belly, the sun in his ears, the sun  
in his balls, the sun in his paws, the sun  
in his claws, the sun in his cock, the sun  
in his eyes, the sun in his blood, the sun  
in his heart, the sun in his sperm.

*You must be born again through this.*

*This. This sacrificial bliss.*

*This.*



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## THE BEAR

1

In late winter  
I sometimes glimpse bits of steam  
coming up from  
some fault in the old snow  
and bend close and see it is lung-colored  
and put down my nose  
and know  
the chilly, enduring odor of bear.

2

I take a wolf's rib and whittle  
it sharp at both ends  
and coil it up  
and freeze it in blubber and place it out  
on the fairway of the bears.

And when it has vanished  
I move out on the bear tracks,  
roaming in circles  
until I come to the first, tentative, dark  
splash on the earth.  
And I set out  
running, following the splashes  
of blood wandering over the world.  
At the cut, gashed resting places  
I stop and rest,  
at the crawl-marks  
where he lay out on his belly  
to overpass some stretch of bauchy ice  
I lie out  
dragging myself forward with bear-knives in my fists.

3

On the third day I begin to starve,  
at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would  
at a turd sopped in blood,  
and hesitate, and pick it up,  
and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down,  
and rise  
and go on running.

4

On the seventh day,  
living by now on bear blood alone,  
I can see his upturned carcass far out ahead, a scragged,  
steamy hulk,  
the heavy fur ruffling in the wind.

I come up to him  
and stare at the narrow-spaced, petty eyes,  
the dismayed  
face laid back on the shoulder, the nostrils  
flared, catching  
perhaps the first taint of me as he  
died.

I hack

a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,  
and tear him down his whole length  
and open him and climb in  
and close him up after me, against the wind,  
and sleep.

5

And dream  
of lumbering flatfooted  
over the tundra,  
stabbed twice from within,  
splattering a trail behind me,  
splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,  
no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,  
which dance of solitude I attempt,  
which gravity-clutched leap,  
which trudge, which groan.

6

Until one day I totter and fall—  
fall on this  
stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,  
to digest the blood as it leaked in,  
to break up  
and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze  
blows over me, blows off  
the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood  
and rotted stomach  
and the ordinary, wretched odor of bear,

blows across  
my sore, lolled tongue a song  
or screech, until I think I must rise up  
and dance. And I lie still.

7

I awaken I think. Marshlights  
reappear, geese  
come trailing again up the flyway.  
In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear  
lies, licking  
lumps of smeared fur  
and drizzly eyes into shapes  
with her tongue. And one  
hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,  
the next groaned out,  
the next,  
the next,  
the rest of my days I spend  
wandering: wondering  
what, anyway,  
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry  
by which I lived?

## LAST TIME AT THE BUEN

Say coyote and mean surprise.  
Say fallen petals and mean the way you look at me.  
Say *espinaca* and mean the color leaves learn at birth.  
Say doorway and mean a courtyard from memory.  
Say chocolate and mean little Buddha in the mouth.  
Say febrero and mean first scent of sweet acacia on the wind.

When we are gone say lemon tree, say new buds, say palm fronds,  
And mean that you loved it here.  
Say *maguey* and mean thorny guardians of the heart.

Say mesquite and mean the rattle of later.  
Say that twice and mean the rattle heard over long distances of night alone.  
Say stars falling, and don't mean that.  
Say fish in the quiet pond and mean early rain.

Say starfish and I can't tell you what that means.  
Say cloud and mean a dream that wakes you.  
Say glass table and mean the first step on a journey.  
Say tamales and mean Kalamata olives.  
Say I will give you what I have brought and mean voice.  
Say doorway again and see what it means.  
Say look one more time and mean thank you.

*~Judyth Hill*