

MARION QUEDNAU

*Paradise, Later Years*

I. I am popular with animals:  
they approach the kitchen at dawn, in cahoots,  
one already caterwauling for hours,  
the large black dogs prostrating themselves at my feet  
in ridiculous mime of hunt-and-gather, the pup sitting cleverly  
kitty-corner to the fridge she admires for its cool aspects  
of foraging,

and the whole lot fix their eyes  
on the particular way I lift my buttered pumpernickel toast,  
whether I am feeling in good spirits, or not;  
we have rules, of course,

I am the shilly-shallying boss  
and they win only fallen morsels or mouldy bits of cheese,  
according to age or appetite;

and bear me little grudge  
for rearing up out of bed and living in people-years,  
a seemingly grand stretch of time  
from where my passel sit, kowtowing—

but in truth, we squander most of it, rage inwardly, lie  
blithely to loved ones, betray already feint  
loyalties, and worry

(but not enough, never enough) about consuming  
free-range eggs (the happier sort)

or bacon rind being not so far removed from the sordid  
circumstances of factory pork, and why we didn't know for so long  
that lobster, in a quite unlimited way, *do* suffer,  
don't even go into shock when they're boiled alive, every nerve  
ending on the job, and people still not minding;

I scarcely believe any longer  
in a scurrilous god having once granted me, or anyone else,  
dominion over even a fishbowl—

all that remains at the tail end, I tell  
my riff-raff crew of moochers, is to renege  
or chafe in some pukingly-stale hospital room,  
everything we've been given  
narrowed to impasse, hardened,  
like our hapless arteries, the sorry  
constraint of our hearts—

the animals, *my* animals,  
clearly unmoved by this human horror-show  
in which they repeat themselves in faux handshakes  
and pretend-fetch, wag and loll, *play dead*,  
really ham it up, make cavalier forays  
with unbidden enthusiasm onto verboten sofas or dining tables,  
they'll stoop to anything  
foolish, and thereby more endearing,  
that might win me over—

I've taught them everything I know:

that greed is largely forgivable  
grandstanding, and making a small ruckus is good, might still  
change the world, and thirst  
when it hits you, despite an abundance of water and wine  
for some, and nothing dripping down the spout for all the rest,  
is merely stoppered-up desire,  
and what makes humans so different  
from that lobster not going at all gently  
is that we can have what we want—

scary thought.





and look good to themselves in each escapade  
if only they are brave,  
that's all that's required  
on a rocky ledge in the Andalusians, or sniffing the wind  
on picture-perfect buttes in Montana, a magnificent storm  
hulking on the brow of the horizon  
with enough electric commotion  
in the brouhaha clouds to send my fantastic superhero house pets  
scampering through the blown grasses—

When we shamble toward  
our piecemeal sharing of foodstuffs, mornings,  
are these ancient heroics still what they want?

II.                   What do I know—  
I've only seen wild horses once,  
set against a blue light high up in shale canyons  
in the Pryor Mountains;  
I was still young,  
heady with searching for something my father had promised  
would be remarkable,  
and then the mustangs stared us down,  
a small grouping, their feathered legs half in shadow,  
and the way they took flight—  
*upwards*, it seemed, through the radiant, shaken dust—  
well, I was blinded, thought them angels.

Having been found, they were clearly afraid—  
and so were we—  
the way my father packed up the camera in a hurry,  
shooed his own small herd of stragglers back toward the car—  
and drove along the Yellowstone with a vengeance,  
as though his family had prevented him from becoming  
a better herdsman or photographer, something  
he had never quite risked,  
an early snow falling in the higher passes, the autumn hills  
staggered with antelope and twelve signs in total  
of roadside motels called *The Sportsman*:  
and I could see  
how it would be a struggle to stay alive  
and look beautiful doing it  
in the way my mother sat proudly in the passenger seat,  
said little all the way home.

III. I admire the horses, *my* hay-burners,  
the ones I keep pent-up on a single hectare  
of mostly spent grasses, for still having a clue;  
at each changing of light  
they are newly amazed  
by what's changed in the scene while they weren't looking,  
a pop-can glinting within a greater sea of frost  
or man's hat bobbing along the road's verge  
a possible horse-tragedy—  
they *know* and *know*, like some sort of horse mantra,  
they can't afford to fall or be broken,  
lose one another in haste,

and there's strange comfort  
for my threesome in pushing through a strained sun,  
entering each day like a flickering slide-show  
and showing off their grandiose caution;  
if they swing around in real alarm  
and I just happen to be standing by the gate,  
lost in thought about an ex-lover, well,  
they get me up on my toes, literally  
save my life  
and the words, *trampled*, or *unaware*,  
*heart in a million pieces*  
become as acute as falling stars.

I once tried to justify keeping horses  
as good investments for would-be backyard Olympics  
or pending farm taxes, but these days  
I confess I sequester them just for  
the sake of outrageous beauty—

and we all feel the risk, believe me;  
I give them long commutes where I might never return,  
their sorrowful eyes accuse me of this—  
and anxious training sessions, in circles, at canters  
with horse-necks bending just so, at a proper learned cadence,  
and between times trick them with a rip-roaring view  
to everywhere else but where they're staidly corralled,  
restrained from running too hard or too far  
just for the nostalgic effect—

and they can hear the baying of domestic dogs  
run amuck as wolves, while I offer them gratuitous hay

amid an all-they-can-eat buffet  
of assorted thistles, dandelion, fescue, and orchard grasses,  
(a few toxic buttercups and ragwort thrown into the mix),  
grant them sweaty flanks  
in summer stamping against the bugs, it must be hell,  
and cold rusings of rain, westerly winds galore;

I do the whole moot-horse mock-up  
of the way it's always been,  
lend their heave-ho retirement under a scant lean-to  
some depth and breadth,  
so they can thrill to the nearly-wild notion  
they might yet come and go  
as they please;

he formerly a stallion, she still a persnickety she,  
the youngster a handsome failure  
at the races, one of those ne'er-do-well sons of a good family  
inclined to hedging their bets and still losing,  
pumping up their spirits with rarified addictions.  
The veteran nags were astute in their time at playing polo,  
actually bore down on the white zig-zag ball  
as if it mattered,  
shoulder-checking their rivals at full gallop  
so a few men with time on their hands, mostly doctors  
or mobsters swinging mallets,  
might feel at the top of their game, really alive—

My pretty little herd  
is impatient for its return to grace;  
if, at one time, they were micro-managed

by young girls braiding their unruly forelocks, wanting  
to assuage half-ton rebels between their thighs,  
that's all over now;

I like swift animals, in huge format,  
with a hundred feet of intestine tucked into hefty loins;  
I'm always shovelling their sweet crap  
toward the late summer's nasturtiums blooming nicely  
into November and the ripe, red tomatoes

tasting real for a change;  
the old shit clings to the new and prolific  
in the same stubborn way that the horses, *my* horses,  
remain in sight and footloose, both sturdy  
and ephemeral,

bring with them each spring  
the lively chit-chat of the swallows newly returned from Bolivia  
choosing my swaybacked barn for their thorny bit of child-rearing,  
all the nests finally too small, the teetering fledglings  
leaving home at a moment's notice—

the shirkers and shy ones never do well.  
Each time it's the same, I delicately  
pitchfork the tiny, free-fallen forms into the manure,  
hectic parents grieving in swallow trajectory,  
the flies angrily riding horseback  
ready to take death far afield.



the poor beast's vestibular function,  
tell me his fourth lumbar vertebra isn't any great shakes,  
there'll be no more jumping on a hot stove  
as if through wondrous rings of fire,  
and he'll probably suffer  
another stroke, and I have to *decide*—  
now that the cat is mostly addled, walks crab-wise,  
has lost his Chicago-blues, hard-smokin' meow,  
his modus operandi of complaint, opens his stale mouth  
to no sound at all—

but I read his lips, how he still feels  
like a thirty-something-year-old (in people years)  
and I know exactly what he means—  
hell, it's no fun calling the shots,  
so I grab the limp cat who literally can't hurt a flea,  
he's one step removed from pure metaphor;  
we made a pact ages ago  
when I found the abandoned bobcat-lookalike  
mewling under a neighbour's hot tub,  
and now the whole death-defying shtick  
is right in our faces, it's all we can do  
to watch spurious episodes of *Matlock* on somnolent afternoons,  
simply sit back and peruse the world with rabbit-ears antennae  
pointing east and south,  
as if to our own personal meccas;

*Family Feud* is next, I murmur to no one in particular,  
and he winks one golden eye, as if to say  
*Can it get any better than this*  
*in our flickering K-k-k-kingdom?*

V. I am comfortable with animals.  
So was Emily Carr, and so, too,  
cantankerous Pound, and Forster,  
always finagling his fine prose with constrained servants  
and pent-up sexual mores. Rilke not so much.

The hairs from the Russian wolfhounds  
always posing beside the countess disturbed him,  
given his disposition for wearing dark, worsted coats. The noise  
the brutes made when eating.  
He had a thing, though, about watching  
the pacing of the caged, black panther  
in *Le Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, thought of his mother's  
white hands on the piano  
being scarfed by those slaving jaws in captivity,  
and felt faint, more relieved than ashamed,  
studied this auspicious conflict of emotions  
in broken gestalts of old houses and young girls  
as only a gifted introvert can.

I once translated the zoo poem  
at school, changed the German for *glance*  
to the English for *recognition*, took liberties as well  
with the morose phrasing for *ceases to be*  
and called it what it was,  
a *small death* of living  
within cramped quarters, and we the humdrum caretakers,  
clearly lacking in imagination  
to keep and keep and keep our dangerous cobras and cassowaries  
at bay, stirring without respite in anticipation  
of release;  
in my concocted verse

I opened all the latches in all the wrought-iron gardens  
and let the big cat go free—

for which springing of gates and astonishing  
effects (the poem became more a Wallace Stevens affair then,  
too modern with chasing foot-policemen and ice cream vendors)

I was admonished:  
my teacher with his long, brave hair and paisley shirts  
was right to remind me  
the poem was more about the person watching  
than the pivoting beast behind bars—

But is it love  
to observe suffering, even grant it  
a strained beauty all the better  
to scribe its effects?  
That seemed more like science to me, or law,  
the way you can argue almost anything,  
or war, a cruel or ludicrous  
end to things before they even begin  
than any plain art, and I said so:  
*Isn't the whole point  
to get over ourselves?*

VI. I am lugubrious with animals,  
have a certain notoriety for speaking my mind.

*Eventually we are all alone,*

I told the black bear  
roosting in my plum tree last summer.  
He'd fallen asleep in the upper branches  
nicely pruned with his five-hundred-pound butt, *crack -snap!*  
and his grizzled muzzle—so a grandpa then  
and I should show some respect—  
peeked through the purpled leaves in my direction  
when I tooted the old Chevy's horn, *Boop-hoop, blam, blam!*

I had to clear a passage,  
get from here to there without dying, without  
unduly disturbing him either (it was a real trade-off).  
“Get out of my tree, you bad-ass,  
you fruit thug, you big, beautiful bamboozler!” I heckled,  
as if he were the last in a series of unrequited loves.  
“I don't want you here when I get home!”

Profoundly abashed at my blaring use of language  
and truck cacophony,  
or perhaps pretending,  
he made no move to clamber down, was not even  
furious with himself for overeating.

I envied him that, hadn't meant to insult him—  
merely rouse him  
from some dream of humans as lunch-box providers,  
restoring a right-minded hierarchy  
to the ancient stature of trees, and all guilty circumstance  
fractured within my own backyard.

*I was a god once,*  
I told him more quietly  
within a breathless sort of cha-cha-cha  
rising through the dark limbs of the air—  
and it's true, he seemed surprised, began  
scratching his left ear;  
I was once round-and-round, and laughing,  
shot with quizzical light  
and danced, like *Rumi's* ecstatic friend,  
*Shams*, who could, by all reports,  
feed off the glance of another for a thousand years—

*and will be again.*

BARRY BUTSON

*Milton in His Garden*

For the sake of small potatoes I have killed a toad  
Impaled it on a tine of my potato fork,  
fat spud with blood      Bit of a shock  
when I removed it thinking vegetable  
and it wriggled animal  
I buried it with the quickness of the guilty

My fault, digging in dirt out here so late  
Poor toad had gone underground for winter  
My practice is to dig earlier in the Fall  
when stalks are still there for my hand to find  
That damn poem has taken so much time this year,  
taken me away from better things, no doubt, though  
my daughters would keep me from my garden and at my desk  
where they tell me a blind man belongs  
I suppose they are wise in their warnings;  
I have needlessly killed a toad

and Heaven does not count accomplishments  
above the slaughter of the innocents

I have dug my last potatoes