2005

White elephant

Kristen Brosamer
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Brosamer, Kristen, "White elephant" (2005). *Master's Theses*. 2745.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.m4kh-c7xw>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/2745

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

WHITE ELEPHANT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Kristen Brosamer

August 2005

UMI Number: 1429408

Copyright 2005 by
Brosamer, Kristen

All rights reserved.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 1429408

Copyright 2006 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2005

Kristen Brosamer

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. John Pollock, Professor

Dr. Samuel Maio, Professor

Alan Soldofsky, Professor

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

08/26/05

ABSTRACT

WHITE ELEPHANT

by Kristen Brosamer

This thesis is a collection of poems expressing the subjective experiences of four elephant characters, written from their point of view. Structured in four separate sections, the narratives of each elephant character employ different poetic forms, including blank verse, the English sonnet, and free verse, as well as a combination of these. This thesis therefore investigates the complex relationship between the poetic form assigned to each character and the development of that character's voice and personality.

The first three elephant characters endure hardships similar to human experiences, and these poems explore the characters' responses to this range of experiences—including the deaths of family members, cultural displacement, physical injury, trauma-induced mental illness, miscarriage, recovery in a sanctuary, motherhood, imprisonment, and survival. The final elephant character (a ghost) places the preceding three narratives in a historical context and discusses the possible fate of modern elephants.

I dedicate this book to all the mothers in my life.
Adam, Milo, and Bailey—this is also for you.

I wish to gratefully acknowledge:

Oria Douglass-Hamilton
Cynthia Moss
Katy Payne
Joyce Poole

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface: “Outside In: A Jazz-Based Approach to Writing an Animal Narrative”	viii
Works Cited in Preface	xviii

MOSS

I. What’s Left of Mother	2
II. That Day.....	3
III. Away	4
IV. Others.....	5
V. Katy.....	6
VI. Abandoned	8
VII. Kept.....	10
VIII. Fertile	12
IX. Reunion.....	14
X. Joy.....	15
XI. Family	17
XII. What’s Left of Me.....	18

JOY

I. Trunk Lessons.....	20
II. The Possum.....	21
III. Somewhere Else.....	22
IV. Answers.....	23
V. The Bull	24
VI. Keepers	25
VII. The Circle.....	26
VIII. Escape	27
IX. Caught.....	28
X. Reunited	29
XI. Go Back	30
XII. Cycles.....	31

KATY

I. Daughter’s Vigil.....	33
II. Oria	34
III. Gone.....	35
IV. Light.....	36
V. Moss.....	37
VI. Still.....	38
VII. Alive.....	39
VIII. Woods	40
IX. Seasons.....	41
X. Joy	42

XI.	Song	43
XII.	Path	44

ORIA

I.	Bearing.....	46
II.	The Day I Die.....	47
III.	Into the Woods.....	48
IV.	Coping.....	50
V.	Limbo.....	51
VI.	America.....	52
VII.	Chances.....	53
VIII.	Progress.....	54
IX.	Images.....	56
X.	Joy.....	57
XI.	Go Back	58
XII.	Answers.....	59

PREFACE

Outside In: A Jazz-Based Approach to Writing an Animal Narrative

I have always felt called to write an animal story. Growing up, I spent most of my time either catching animals or reading books about them. I systematically devoured all the young adult titles by E.B. White and A.A. Milne, plus Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. What appealed to me most about this niche of literature was not that I found animals cute or sweet. I understood through my interactions with them that animals were capable of a depth of thought and emotion that approached my own, and in accepting this premise, my favorite authors endowed their creature characters with a wide range of human affectations—speech, clothing, culture. But many of their characters lived within the rather narrow range of experience and sentiment allowed by children's literature.

Intrigued by the idea of inhabiting an animal consciousness, I read Richard Adams's rabbit novel, *Watership Down*, and was struck by Adams's treatment of his subject matter. Instead of writing a two-dimensional children's narrative, Adams had created for his rabbit characters a mature vocabulary and rich mythology that counteracted the sentimentality so blatant in many, if not most, other beast-versus-man stories. Adams writes about his rabbits with a detail and intensity more often associated with writing about people—which allows an adult audience to genuinely relate to the characters' experiences. I.A. Richards, in his book *Practical Criticism*, explores ways to avoid sentimentality, and promotes a similar approach to Adams': “. . . take the distorted sentiment and work it into close and living relation with some scene concretely and

truthfully realised, which may act as a standard of reality and awaken the dream-infected object of sentiment into actuality” (254). After reading Adams, I knew that approaching my own animal story with a keen adult sensibility, rather than vague childish fantasy, would grant my characters dignity and credibility. My animal story would not be written for children.

A few years ago I learned of Jenny and Shirley, two elephants reunited at The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee after two decades spent apart. Their reunion is the genesis of this collection, *White Elephant*. A frenzy of elephant research revealed to me creatures of depth, nobility, and complexity—both elephant and human. The work and writings of Cynthia Moss, Katy Payne, Joyce Poole, and Oria Douglass-Hamilton enabled me to enter the elephant consciousness from the outside in—without ever having the benefit of firsthand experience. Through the names of my characters, I pay tribute to these matriarchs; they equipped me with a working knowledge of African elephants.

But when I sat down to write the collection, obvious questions arose. First, how would I, a human being, create a convincing elephant narrative from nothing but a catalog of facts? What would my elephants sound like? And what techniques would I employ to avoid the pitfalls of sentimentality? Curiously, my answers came from listening to a 1960 recording of John Coltrane playing “My Favorite Things,” the Rodgers & Hammerstein song made popular by the film *The Sound of Music*. As I listened to Coltrane lay out the song’s melody, then depart from and lift above it with such startling saxophone virtuosity that the melody, the form, is transcended by

Coltrane's instrument, his artistic voice, I realized that a jazz strategy combining formal and free verse could solve some of my problems.

What Coltrane does, as a black jazz musician co-opting a tune we associate with Maria, the vonTrapp's white nanny, is move through a familiar melody, a constructed form, into an impromptu territory entirely of his own making. Coltrane's version of the song transcends the song's original form. I felt that, likewise, allowing animals (that is, the segment of the elephant population enslaved and marginalized by humans) to speak through a form devised by humans would lend the narrative particular authenticity and irony. Not only would my immigrant elephant characters be 'speaking' American English, they would be subverting the sonnet and blank verse forms popularized by some of English literature's greatest: Shakespeare and Milton. An elephant character narrating her story in blank verse would thus defy her own historical oppressors, and struggle to make herself understood despite the limitations that a non-native language, captivity, and the blank verse form, impose. Like Coltrane, the elephant character could free herself through and from the form, demonstrating that artistic expression—voice—is not bound by identity.

Simultaneously, Coltrane reminded me form is a vehicle for voice that could take me outside myself and into the powerful realm of imagination, where I would be free to improvise, to riff off the range of universal experience. I would shrug off my humanity, inhabit the elephants I knew so well because of my research, and through blank verse, through the sonnet, I would make my facts sing. The outside reader would enter the internal, personal elephant experience through the doorway of form. Formal discipline

would give the elephants' narrative drive and focus, hopefully deflecting sentimental generalities. Free verse would then check and temper the overall narrative's trajectory with reflection, give the reader time to absorb.

Gradually, I chose a combination of songs the elephants would sing—forms appropriate for addressing a multi-voiced narrative. To ground the story, the first character, Moss, opens the narrative and establishes its rhythm with blank verse, ironically invoking some of her human oppressors' most famous heroes: Shakespeare, Milton, Frost. In order to engage the average modern reader, I felt it best to avoid archaic syntax and model Moss after Frost's more natural diction. In Frost's "Directive," for example, the first few lines of the poem gently enclose the reader in the narrative while setting the slow, nostalgic tone that will characterize the journey:

Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house (1138)

We are taken into quiet confidence. The narrator understands a need we have and just what will remedy it—a retreat into the simpler past, where the memories of things are the only things we need. The narrator, "Who only has at heart [our] getting lost," extracts us from our life and time and leads us, with the sure, steady pace that marks iambic pentameter, off down the road toward the site of a town that once existed (1139). The narrative reminds us of its history ("there's a story in a book about it"), reassures us we

are not in danger from the Glacier, and calms our fear of the cellar holes marking the places where houses once stood.

Frost's narrative works on these four levels simultaneously—removing us from our perspective, telling us the story, anticipating our reactions, and reshaping our emotional responses. It even suggests what to imagine—who once walked this way, “who might be just ahead of [us] on foot.” Eventually, the narrative leads us to the hiding place of the stolen Grail-like goblet, and the spring where we can, wearied from our journey and our previous life, “[d]rink and be whole again beyond confusion” (1140). The extraordinary way Frost uses inclusive narration in blank verse to carry us into a fictive landscape and cue our emotional responses is exactly what I try to achieve through Moss's narrative. However, Moss's voice, closer to the tightly coiled clockspring of emotional experience, speaks more lyrically, more intensely, than Frost's easy, rambling travelogue through the countryside. If anything, the heartbeat cadence of Moss's voice keeps in our minds the rocking boat, the chugging train, human-made machines, the ticking clock of the elephants' fate.

The cadence of Moss's voice is carried by the next speaker of the story, Katy, an elephant character who is gradually going insane. In the beginning, she speaks with an ordered mind, in the tight, short sonnet form (used later by Joy, the other young elephant). But as she ages, and becomes more traumatized, her identity and the poetic form begin to wobble, until she reaches sanctuary—where she begins to recover. To show a similar narrative process in reverse, let's consider W.H. Auden's “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.”

In its first part, the poem's verse is fluid, colloquial and free. Its narrative evokes grief through image, landscape and understatement. Each stanza carries us indeterminately from place to place, then returns our attention to Yeats. Yeats is again pushed into the background by imagery of the external world, then he resurfaces, resubmerges. The final section cycles back to its beginning: "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day" (1368). The narrative's external imagery, ultimately, reiterates the inevitability of loss. I strive to replicate this kind of free verse, image-driven style during that crisis point in Katy's madness when she is only able to express herself in skips and repetitions, a broken record of narrative that loses form and coherence.

The second section of Auden's elegy moves away from Yeats, making a larger statement that poetry, being a medium for immortality, can withstand death, can retain order and purpose. Katy's middle stage, when she is still clinging to sanity, shares this section's hallmarks—irregular, but recognizable, vestiges of meter and rhyme, with a narrative tendency to float toward abstraction. Auden in the final section transforms all hardship to beauty, all horror to hope. Its narrative essentially exhorts future poets to strive toward goodness. I imitate the final section's strategy in my approach to the initial and recovering poems we see from Katy which are perfect in meter, ordered by rhyme. Katy's journey away from and back to the protective shelter of form similarly suggests the possibility of hope. As Auden reassures himself with Yeats's memory, so does Katy with the memory of Oria—both figures represent a higher power, a better life, something to keep living and striving for. Katy's circular narrative also resembles the satisfying

point in “My Favorite Things” when, after breaking the melody apart, Coltrane heads out, and reassembles the melody perfectly, with flourishes, an illustration that form can be just as comforting as it can be restrictive.

In Joy, the white elephant of the collection’s title, we feel most keenly this inherent tension of form. Physically the smallest character, whose expectations and limitations are greatest, Joy speaks in sonnets (English, a nod to Shakespeare). Within the form, I want the reader to inhabit the immediacy of Joy’s experience, to more transparently allow the reader to grow with her, explore the sanctuary with her. In Sylvia Plath’s Italian sonnet, “Conversation Among the Ruins,” the narrative directs and moves our vision and mood: “Through portico of my elegant house you stalk/ With your wild furies...” (21). With sense of place and speaker-audience relationship so quickly established, we are immediately, voyeuristically pulled into the scene. Plath’s *my-estate* describes the *you*-relationship, “disturbing...rending...fallen...appalling...bleak.” The narrative points to deterioration and decay, until we reach the volta, at which point the narrative begins to suggest some possibility at least of restoring order, if not repairing damage.

Instead of pulling us angrily through the broken landscape, Plath’s narrative stops us. We stand between the couple, the “Fractured pillars” that “frame prospects of rock.” We observe their silences—“you stand heroic” and “I sit / Composed”—while the connection between them remains unbroken. The speaker’s question rises unanswered: “What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?” The shape of the Italian sonnet suggests the resolution: stop. Consider. But it doesn’t offer the next direction, the

answer, maintaining our sense as readers that the fundamental problems here, like “fractured pillars,” will not be easily repaired. In Joy’s sonnets, I strive to capture Plath’s compressed, bounded landscape of the self, in which internal growth is represented by external imagery. But unlike Plath’s chosen form, I hope the English sonnet Joy speaks through offers, with its final couplets, a reiterating sense of closure, of confidence that we expect for Joy a positive ending.

With Oria’s closing free verse narrative, I wanted to be able to move fluidly across and through the other characters’ narratives, connecting them with enough history and context that a reader would come away from the total story feeling thoughtful, knowledgeable, and, perhaps, changed (the way I originally felt after hearing the story of Jennie and Shirley, the elephants reunited in sanctuary). To enable Oria to move back and forth in time and space, it seemed appropriate to release her from form and meter. In this way, she can move as dreams and thoughts, and often jazz solos, do—illogically, irregularly, through the convolutions of consciousness. I wanted her to be like Coltrane, to be able to close her eyes and follow her instincts.

Eyes closed. This is the way Li-Young Lee wrote his novel-length prose poem, *The Winged Seed*, a “remembrance” in which Lee explores his relationship with his past and with his deceased father. At once poignantly personal and vibrantly expressive, Lee’s memoir reads less like a journal than a dream—in places sequential and lucid, in others wildly imagistic and associative. Perhaps because of this intuitive style, we respond to it viscerally, emotionally, rather than intellectually, the way we often respond to improvisational jazz. In some of the poem’s most powerful passages, Lee achieves a

kind of lyric intensity through episodic, cyclical meditation that allows everything—his personal history, cultural displacement, religious insight—to rise to the surface all at once.

Is night my ancestors' gloomy customs, then? Will I ever be free of their tortoiseshell combs and smoking punk, hand-tooled jambs that stalled and amazed me at temple thresholds in a provincial capital? Will I be free of my great-grandfather's three thousand descendents? Soon, there will be so little of me I may actually arrive. Soon, I'll be born. Soon, I'll know how to live. (32)

Lee's stream-of-consciousness memoir lets us follow the unbounded movement of his mind, his unique process of rumination. Similarly, my character Oria is a questioner. Hers is the voice of memory, encouraging the reader, after moving from the outside in, to step back and consider the whole experience, to feel the effects of all four narratives together. Oria engages the reader directly, invites the reader to take part in the experience, to ask questions, to feel, leading us to respond, much the way Lee does.

Inevitably, I discovered that *White Elephant* is not the simple animal story I set out to write. Through research I learned that I shared with elephants many common experiences—death of loved ones, miscarriage, depression, motherhood—and common responses. Elephants also cry, grieve, fracture, and heal. Wearing the masks of my characters enabled me to express these intimate commonalities, and allowed me to process some of my own painful experiences while developing empathy for the very real plight of modern elephants. I hope that you, my reader, will recognize yourself—familiar fragments of melody—in these characters too. Maybe you will notice that the inside of

an elephant's experience is not so different from yours as it appears from the outside. I hope that, like Coltrane's music, this collection does more than exercise your ear and intellect. I hope it will show you a way out of yourself, a different version of the song, a new path to walk through the woods. Please, open this collection with care. It's my gift to you. Maybe you will find that you are the white elephant after all.

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." Ferguson 1368-70.

Ferguson, Margaret, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, eds. The Norton Anthology of Poetry. 4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Frost, Robert. "Directive." Ferguson 1138-40.

Lee, Li-Young. The Winged Seed: A Remembrance. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Plath, Sylvia. The Collected Poems. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992.

Richards, I.A. Practical Criticism. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1929.

Rodgers, Richard and Oscar Hammerstein. My Favorite Things. Perf. John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Steve Davis, Elvin Jones. October 21, 1960. Atlantic, 1970.

Moss

mature female, orphaned in cull at age two

I. What's Left of Mother

It's true. I do remember everything.
But most of what has happened since that day
I'd choose to unremember if I could.
The moat of time between that day and now
has deepened into decades. Memories,
distilled in slumbering, recur and rise
like tides, their edges undulant as dreams.
What's left of Africa, of then, of her?
Besides her earth-wet scent, her mother-heat
as I pressed close to nurse, her ginger touch
that swept along my cheek and ear—besides
the bass reverberation of her voice,
then more familiar than my own, and how
I felt its song before I learned its words—
besides this sense of peace, of she and I
at rest, her trunk draped over me, within
the standing circle of our kindred group:
my aunts who once had lifted me to nurse
when I was born, my sister sheltering
me as I slept—besides belonging there—
besides awakening in pre-dawn gray
to grasslands trembling with birdsong just
before the dusk gave way to gold and gold
to green as far as we could see—besides
impressions of the time when we were free,
what's left? The unremitting flood of sad,
suffusive longing for our life before.

II. That Day

Before. Before. We'd gathered side by side
along the tranquil water's edge to bathe
and slake our thirst. I filled my trunk and drank
a long while undisturbed. My image in
the water warped, distorted. Then a wave
of rumbled warning rippled through our group—
Away! Away! My mother pressed herself
against me, lifted me and stood me up,
maneuvering behind me, ushering
me forward with the pressure of her trunk.
Close by I heard an unfamiliar sound—
a popping, more distinct than thunder, close
and crisp like branches splitting in a storm.
We surged in sickening confusion up
the ridge that ringed the water hole, away
from where the tangled forest thicket cracked
and bristled with abominable noise.
Away too late. And everything too late.
Too late alert. Too late retreating and
too late our screaming out for guidance from
the oldest mother—first one down and dead.
By twos and threes the others dropped mid-stride,
brought down by what unseen assailant we
could not defend against. When her time came,
my mother's body jerked and shuddered hard
and heavy to the ground. I wheeled around
to find her face, to listen for her next
command. Her mouth was slack, eyes blank. I saw
a scattered spray of holes between her eye
and cheekbone weeping blood. Another hole
behind her ear I touched then, bloodying
my trunk so I could curl it to my lips
and taste the end of her—more salt than sea,
more mineral than mud, more still than stone.

III. Away

That's how they found me afterward, alone.
With blood-streaked trunk and tear-streaked eyes I stood,
one foot against her corpse, the last alive
amid a godforsaken sea of dead
and dying hundred, all my family
laid waste. Emerging from the woods, they came
to claim the carcasses, and me. In shock,
and paralyzed by fear, by grief, I let
them net me. Several held me down and bound
my ankles. Finally, when it occurred
to me to blow the geyser of my rage,
I reared and bucked despite my bonds until
they beat me with their gun butts, branches, wire.
My own blood seeped into the slaughterground
till finally those tiny hands had stilled
my giant will to struggle, all my fight.
Like mother, I eventually collapsed
and waited for the killing blow. But no.
They got me up a ramp, into a truck.
The ground began to sway and lurch beneath
me in a way that made my stomach twist.
The truck deposited me at a dock
where, strapped into a harness, I was hauled
above the ground. My straight legs pronged against
the terrifying levity, the height,
the grotesque rigor mortising of flight.
The darkened hold that swallowed me could not
assuage my want for stationary ground.
When, three weeks later, seasick, sleep-deprived,
I swung once more from ship to shore, and touched
the ground with all four feet—I closed my eyes
and stood, near death, unmoving, on the bright
and brutal doorstep of America.
A handler came, and led me, stunned, away.

IV. Others

I may have thought I was the only one
at first. The ship and harborplace were all
aswarm with people, more than I had seen
in my two years of life in Africa.
Bewildered by the city din, I could
not hear another of my kind. My eyes,
soon reaccustomed to the light, saw none.
No, I was unmistakably alone.
Before my legs could find my feet again,
they loaded me into a boxcar with
a window made of bars. The whirling air
that signaled our departure brought with it
the overwhelming stench of humankind—
unnatural, unnamable and wrong—
to all my straining senses an affront.
Unrecognizable, the wind described
a scentscape I could not have dreamt a month
before, a world away in Africa.
Bereft of trees, devoid of greenery,
an artificial scenery unreeled
behind me, buildings, pavement, factories,
and train tracks carrying me farther from
my home, my past—myself—than I could bear.
I braced myself against the wall to which
my legs were chained and tried in vain to shut
my senses down. Numb hours passed and night
began to fall. I felt within my chest
a subtle rumble. Not my own. The low
and certain song of my own language, up
ahead, not far away. It shook me from
my daze. I raised my trunk and trumpeted.
My querying hello met no response.
The train hissed, slowed, and drifted to a stop.
This time the news the wind delivered stood
my hair on end. I barely dared to breathe.
Unknown—but more familiar than the reek
of man: the scent of other elephants.

V. Katy

They could have brought me anywhere that night.
I had no fight, no violence left in me.
In darkness, weak from travel, weary to
the bone, I followed unresisting when
they led me to a solitary stall.
I knew by scent the others weren't far
away, but none of them approached or hailed
me. As the handlers anchored all my leg
chains to the wall, I understood that this
peculiar silence bore the iron weight
of many other chains and legs and walls.
In my displacement, in my exodus,
in my uncertain future I was not
alone. The quiet, more than anything,
unsettled me. The handlers brought me food.
I ate my fill but wasn't satisfied.
They brought me water, and I drank. But no
amount could quench my thirst. I needed to
be touched, but metal shackles, bars and bull
hooks were the only touch I'd felt for weeks.
At last the handlers left me, and I watched
despite fatigue for any sign of dawn
approaching—hoping it would bring to light
the mystery of other elephants.
I woke up stiff, surprised that I had slept,
just after day had broken. Human sounds
disturbed the morning air. I shook my ears
awake and heard some voices drawing near,
but I could not see out the windows of
the stall. My chains did not allow much reach.
I agitated them; they wouldn't budge.
When finally the handlers opened up
the door, the sight of her, backlit against
the threshold, made me take a backward step
and raise my trunk in a defensive S.
But when her gold-brown eye met mine, I paused,
detecting in her gaze no challenge, no
aggression. She advanced toward me at
the prodding of a handler, and reached out
her trunk to softly touch inside my mouth,
a simple introduction and hello.

She was the first one of my kind that I
had seen since that apocalyptic day,
the first cow, since my mother, I had felt.
Her name was Katy. As her trunk caressed
my face and gently probed my recent wounds,
I pressed my trunk against her neck, and wept.

VI. Abandoned

I'd found my solace. Katy came to share
my stall, chained at the opposite end from me.
I talked into the nights, recounting what
had happened on that catastrophic day,
the day the water hole betrayed us, filmed
our slaughter with its cold and perfect lens.
But Katy spoke in halting fragments. Her
mind didn't travel in a line, so I
could only guess the greater story—that
her mother died as mine did, savagely.
At times when Katy spoke her mother's name—
Oria—she would pause, as if the dead
could listen. Katy's way was strange and shy,
adrift. But always, Katy shielded me
from handlers when she could, and when
we left the stall to train, she helped me learn
the many tricks and acts they forced us to
perform. We walked in circles, single file,
and held the tails of other elephants
whose unintelligible language kept
our kinds apart, like cows and calves from bulls.
Their skin was smooth, their ears and bodies small
compared to ours. Yet we paraded all
together, stiffly, strangers linked by fear
that one of us at any moment might
be singled out. If any of us balked
we quickly felt the steely tips of bull
hooks targeting our hidden tender spots—
behind the ears, between the legs, where wounds
would not be noticed by the nighttime crowds.
With Katy's help, and at the handlers' hooks,
I gradually learned to shift my weight
precariouly onto my back legs,
to balance there as humans did. As soon
as I could do this trick consistently,
the handlers groomed me for my grand debut.
Since Katy had performed so much before,
she quieted my nerves. *The lights are bright,*
she said. *Ignore the people sounds and smells.*
Pretend you're looking right into the sun.
They fitted us with matching garments, red

and gold draped over backs and brows. Beneath
the fabric's weight, I could barely breathe.
But Katy and the handlers calmly led
me toward the tents where we had trained for months.
As we approached, I heard a sickening throng
of people clamoring within. I shrank
behind the group and felt the cruel prick
of bull hook urging me ahead and through
the doorway. Once inside, I looked around.
A thousand human faces turned—I froze.
Then Katy took a step, her tail entwined
in my reluctant trunk. I followed her.
The audience responded with applause
as loud and terrible as gunfire. Still,
I followed Katy to the center ring.
Awaiting us were two round pedestals,
the same we'd practiced mounting for the last
few months. But now a thousand pairs of eyes
were trained on them, glittering in the hot
and dazzling spotlights. Katy's words came back
to me. As each of us climbed up to take
her place, I looked into the blazing lights,
and at the right command I raised my feet,
like I was reaching for the sun itself.
Then suddenly the light had force. It pushed
me backward in slow motion and I fell.
The silence of the standing crowd could not
quell Katy's mad cacophony.
I fell away from Katy, in that blind
and fateful moment leaving her behind.

VII. Kept

I ended up alive. My right back hip
had cracked, my back leg broken, hobbling
me permanently. Loaded in a truck
that night and driven several hours, I
was conscious only of my agony, and
waited, prostrate, hoping death would soon
return me to a painless place, perhaps
where I would see my family, again
somehow existing, somehow knowing me.
The taste of mother's milk had changed
to blood inside the mouth of memory;
I reached for blood, I reached toward the end.
But my body was my jailor; I was trapped
inside its ruthless fist, inside the truck.
As light began to peer between the cracks,
the trailer opened up into the yard
I would not leave for more than twenty years.
Eventually, my hip and leg improved
enough for me to move about, and I
became the first—and only—crippled and
arthritic elephant the zoo possessed.
I paced that yard a thousand thousand times,
my limping gait a hallmark that endeared
me to the visitors year in, year out.
And all those years were replicates of years
before, today's echoes of yesterdays
and templates of tomorrows. Seasons changed,
and weather, and the flow of faces past
my bleak cement and grass-edged habitat.
For many years the keepers' faces changed
as well, until I noticed one man's face
returning through the months and years, a face
I grew to trust. His hands, unlike the scores
of others I had known, were gentle ones.
He treated me with unexpected care
and kindness. When he looked at me, he held
my gaze, almost as if he understood
what words I might begin to utter, what
requests I might begin to make, as if
we shared a universal tongue. He kept
me eighteen years—a dear companion through

the desolation of my solitude.
He bathed my body, eased my chronic pain
with medicines and brought me special treats
like pumpkins, apples, watermelons, bread.
The day he backed a trailer-truck into
my yard, I wondered if he offered me
the death I once had wished for desperately
and now instinctively resisted. When
he came to lead me in, he spoke with tones
of quiet reassurance, so instead
of pulling back, I stalled, one foot raised up
uncertainly. I searched his eyes for threat,
detecting none. This man would never harm
me. Never would he lead me to my death.
Unhesitating then, I followed him.
There wasn't any reason to look back.
He stayed with me inside the trailer as
it pulled away, and once again the earth
began to move beneath me. As we rode,
and daylight waned, my keeper opened up
a vent to cool us down. The air that washed
across my senses brought me instantly
to Africa. The memories were wet
with green, with golden trees, the songs
of birds, the blessed dew-drenched scents
of night, the hush of woodlands yielding to
the hiss of sweet savannah grasses. Fresh
and overwhelming country air dispersed
all my misgivings. Unexpectedly,
I found myself anticipating what
would happen next—the kind of giddy hope
I hadn't felt since infancy. The strife,
the stagnant intermediary years
evaporated on the evening breeze.
The truck slowed down and stopped. They opened up
the trailer ramp, and in the purple dusk
the trees had gathered round to welcome me.
At once the wind revealed a scent I thought
was lost to me. I trumpeted with joy
and instantly the cries of others boomed
within my chest. Exhilarating, bright
and strange and here and more and beautiful.
Alive! Alive! And safe, and not alone!

VIII. Fertile

I had forgotten things could grow. I mouthed it all at first, the trees and bark, the shrubs and weeds, the vines, the bugs, and anything alive. I held it to my mouth and tongue, and memorized it all. Jagged, thorned, mealy, milky, mud-encrusted, webbed. I wandered over acres, miles of woods and fields, wherever I could tread, and soon my aching bones enjoyed the steady, slow exertion. Now and then I heard a deep, reverberating call, an elephant, a distant bull. And others, too, I heard—the elephants that Katy and I knew from circus days. But hot wire kept us from each other's view. I rumbled back to them, but reveled in my newfound freedom, not prepared to cease my exploration of my territory, my new land, my home. So much was new, the living world, the cricket choruses at night, the thrill of wallowing in mud or napping on the tender grass, the thrill of doing just what I desired, sometimes going all day long without hearing a keeper's voice. At night I wandered back inside the barn, where they would offer food and water, and would check me carefully, and gently, for all signs of health. From time to time I missed my former keeper, but the new ones showed me great respect. I had no reason for alarm. And mostly, I was tired. My forays left me weary and in many ways content. But soon my curiosity about the bull began to grow. I listened for his calls, then started calling out to him. I craved his voice, and stood along the hot wire where I could get closer. Then one day they let me into an adjacent area beyond the barn, an open field where all at once I tasted his invigorating scent. I called out, and his form appeared. He swayed

toward me through the grass, enormous strength
apparent in his massive shoulders, tusks
resplendent in the midday sun—a sight
so glorious I stood transfixed with awe.
The closer he approached, the stronger his
intoxicating redolence became.
I'd never smelled anything like it—rich
and coarse and pungent, overwhelmingly
delicious. He came close to me, then pressed
his trunk inside my mouth and rumbled low.
Sound rippled through my body, and he moved
his trunk with delicate delight along
my back. What happened next I can't express—
a deep embrace, a heavy welling up
of sheer excitement and awareness, more
complete than I had ever felt—and then
he moved away from me. But I had no
desire to follow. I was satisfied.
I went back to my barn and watched the night
unfold its petals, swallowing the light.

IX. Reunion

A year had passed since my encounter with
the bull, and in my belly something grew
and stirred. No longer did I feel alone.
I wandered through the woods without a course,
meandering as slowly as I liked
and browsing here and there for tender plants.
One day, while dozing on my favorite bed
of forest moss, I heard a vehicle
approach the barn, about a mile away.
Not knowing what to make of it, I rose
and made my way back there to see what freight
the truck had brought. Before I reached the barn,
I caught her scent. Amazement lurched inside
my chest. I raised my trunk and called for her—
she answered with a bellow. Fast as I
could go, I dragged myself toward her voice,
inside the barn. There Katy cowered in
the stall adjoining mine, behind a gate.
Diminished, she was rocking back and forth,
a broken mirror of her former self.
I reached through with my trunk, caressing her
familiar cheek and ear to let her know
that here the daylight held no danger, here
the keepers held no hooks, no grudges, here
we didn't have to stay apart. I roared
with fierce newfound resolve. I knew the gate
was weak. I rammed it with my shoulder till
the keepers intervened. They pulled
me back, enough to open up the gate.
I rushed to Katy's side, and leaned myself
against her, hoping I could brush away
our years of separation with my trunk.
She closed her eyes, and right beside me, slept.

X. Joy

When Katy first accompanied me out into the yard, she came reluctantly, as if she feared the open space, the short expanse of grass that stretched between us and the wooded path I'd cleared before she came. I asked about the years after I left her, but she shied away from questioning, withdrawing from the trauma that had taxed her sanity. Not once did she describe conditions so deplorable, neglect so derelict it almost cost her feet. But clearly Katy now enjoyed her range of movement and preferred the pliant earth to the cement floors of the barn. As months went by, and Katy's rotten feet began to heal, we ventured further out into the sanctuary, both with cautious steps. My belly kept expanding, and the weight renewed the aching in my hip and leg. More often Katy reached the woods before me, waiting patiently for me to follow. Sheltered by the close-knit trees, she visibly relaxed and sometimes sang or murmured to herself. I sensed that she had formed another life beyond her own, an imaginary refuge where the fingers of her pain could not extend, a place protected by the spirit of Oria, Katy's mother. To that place I could not go. I found my bed of moss, and napped, while Katy browsed nearby. A deep insistent pain awoke me, made me shout. Immediately Katy came, and swept her trunk along my belly. *Come*, she said, and pushed me firmly with her head till I regained my feet. She led me back into the barn, and stationed herself at my side. The keepers gathered nearby in one corner of my stall, and then secured my feet. The belly pain distracted me—I didn't mind the ropes the keepers used

for all our medical procedures. I supposed the keepers had a plan to treat me. Meanwhile, Katy, too had been confined to the adjoining stall, as when she first arrived. This was the first time we'd been set apart. Her wide-flared ears and S-raised trunk paid close attention to my surging pains as night progressed. Midnight approached and passed. The pain intensified, so keen it brought me to one knee. But then I felt the hard and overwhelming need to stand. At once the agony burst out of me, and raw relief washed over me. I turned my head to see what such a pain could look like. There lay glistening, and ivory as bone, the smallest elephant I'd ever seen. Before I had a chance to reach back with my trunk, the keepers pulled the creature back into a corner of the stall where I could see them hoist it to its feet and rub its wriggling body with dry blankets. *Your baby!* Katy bugled. *She's alive!* A moment later, keepers helped her come to me, then let her stand alone beside me. Eagerly, the baby opened up her mouth and, raising up her trunk, began to nurse intently at my breast. With sweet surprise and awe, I gently touched her skin, which gleamed a pearly, creamy white, with spots of mottled gray and pink beneath her chest. Her fuzzy ears were creased, and soft as leaves. With growing peace, I stroked her cheek and face. *My baby,* I repeated. *She's my Joy.*

XI. Family

For several days after the birth, they kept us separate, although Katy rarely left the gate between us. Joy delighted me in every way—her milky, muddy scent, her playful, clumsy capering, the queer and wondrous pallor of her petal-skin. But still I wanted Katy near, and when they took my bonds away, I led my Joy to her, where she could smell and touch and taste her with her trunk. When Joy reached out to Katy, feather-strokes exploring up her leg and by her mouth, a flow of tears streaked Katy's cheeks. She curled the baby's trunk inside her own, and rubbed the baby's back as tenderly as my own sister would, were she alive. That night, the keepers left the gate ajar, and Katy, Joy and I have never yet been separated, to this day. Now Katy's found through raising Joy a kind of calm and poise I never could have shown her, had we finished life alone together. Katy's lucid love has brought her back to life and living, back to joy. And Joy has given back to me surprise—the possibility of starting over just when I believed my simple life had cleared its final path. The woods of motherhood lead on and on. In Joy, we find our hope.

XII. What's Left of Me

Some mornings when the air is still and we
are walking to the sanctuary's pond,
I listen closely to the scrubby woods,
and keep Joy close to me, my trunk around
her shoulders as she reaches down to drink.
When Katy leads us quickly through the field
into the shelter of the woods, I'm sure,
like me, she hasn't quite let go of fears
we carry deep inside our aching bones.
It's true. We still remember everything.
But memories for Joy begin right now.
We never knew we had so much to teach.
What happens when we strip away the past?
What's left? Tomorrow's sanctuary: Joy.

Joy

young female, born in sanctuary

I. Trunk Lessons

It doesn't work at first, my floppy trunk.
I have to flip it to the side so I
can nurse, and use my mouth. The milk gets drunk.
I watch my mama's trunk. She says to try
like this—and lowers hers into a pool
of water. How she manages to drink
I still can't figure out. My clumsy tool
gets wet. It flicks and splashes water, slinks
below the surface, sucks and splutters till
I quit and use my mouth. My mama shows
me how to blow the water out, to spill
it slowly where I want it. Mama knows
I'm trying. All she wants to do is teach
me just how far a willing trunk can reach.

II. The Possum

Aunt Katy led us deep into the woods,
an area we hadn't been for weeks.
Fresh buds and leaves were sprouting, and I would
have started browsing, but a nasty reek
choked up my trunk and mouth. Aunt Katy called
me over to the place the stench was worst.
Beneath a bush, a possum lay, all balled
and bunched wrong, teeth bared wide and eyelids pursed.
But I could see it wasn't just asleep.
It didn't move a hair. Its toes were curled
like spiders. *Well, at least she still has feet,*
Aunt Katy said. Sometimes Aunt Katy's world
bewildered me. *Why wouldn't she?* I said.
She said, *They cut them off you when you're dead.*

III. Somewhere Else

My mama says she came from somewhere else
called Africa, a place so big that you
could walk for weeks and never see a fence.
She says Aunt Katy's African-born too,
but isn't blood-related. They each came
alone, because their families were killed.
But Mama still refuses to explain
what happened, as if Africa were filled
with only life and light, the perfect home.
Well, I have never seen another place,
and I have never even been alone.
But if it meant I'd never see her face—
if ears were wings here in America—
I'd never fly away to Africa.

IV. Answers

I'd definitely heard the other elephants,
and smelled them, but the hot wire keeps them far
away from us. My mama says the fence
divides us by the different kinds we are.
Besides the three of us, there is a bull
who's also African, and other ones
that come from somewhere else. I'm never full
of hearing more about them. I have tons
of questions. Mama's answers never quite
fulfill my curiosity. I thought
that she could teach me everything. I might
be wrong. The three of us are not, are not
the only elephants. We're not alone.
Some answers I will find out on my own.

V. The Bull

The keepers let us see the bull today.
They slowly brought him out into a yard
by our enclosure. Katy moved away
the moment he appeared, escaping hard
as she could go into the woods. I turned
to follow her, confused, but Mama stayed.
We'd never separated, and I yearned
to go to Katy, but the stranger weighed
me down. I never guessed he'd be so wide,
so startling; his scent was like a storm,
alarming. Katy running off to hide
made sense—so fearful was his massive form.
But Mama told me not to be afraid.
She murmured, *He's the reason you were made.*

VI. Keepers

I ask my mama what the keepers do,
and why, when they're around, Aunt Katy can't
relax. *The keepers take good care of you,*
she says. It's not the answer that I want.
If they take care of us, I say, *then why*
is Katy scared of them? —*Be quiet now,*
she says. What I suggest, she will deny,
that keepers used to hurt Aunt Katy. How
does she explain Aunt Katy's weirdness? When
will either of them tell me what went wrong
before they came here? What went wrong back then?
She answers, *this is where we all belong.*
The keepers bring us food and medicine.
They can't let out the truth—they've fenced it in.

VII. The Circle

I've followed every inch of hot wire through
the woods, from where it starts to where it ends:
the barn. Inside the circle, nothing's new,
except the arguments when Mama sends
me back inside the barn. If I refuse
to leave the wires alone, she says, I'll pay.
But I am not an infant now. I cut, I bruise,
but I don't cry. I'm making my own way.
I walk the wire a thousand thousand times,
regardless of where she and Katy are.
The two of them can hide from human crimes,
and cryptic pasts. They'll live and die, as far
as I can tell, inside the circled wire.
But I'll live free. I'll go where I desire.

VIII. Escape

I wait until I know for sure the two
of them are dozing in the sleepy woods.
I slip away. What I'm about to do—
it clutches at my guts. I know I should
think twice about it but I quickly push
a leafy tree across the wire, and walk,
exhilarated, scared, into the bush
that's on the other side. At first I balk,
and almost cross right back, but then I feel
the danger calling me. I go to it.
My joy is overpowering and real,
expanding like the world is, infinite.
As night falls, I am very far from home—
and suddenly, tremendously, alone.

IX. Caught

Eventually, I stopped to close my eyes
and rest my feet. I'd wandered through the night.
I woke before the sun began to rise,
remembering disturbing dreams of flight.
I walked in the direction of a road,
since I could smell that water was nearby.
I cleared the woods. Beyond the highway flowed
a creek. The blacktop made me nervous. I
could hear a truck approaching, so I paused.
The truck swerved to a stop not far from me.
A man got out, to stare at me, and raised
a metal bar against his face, to see
me better, I supposed. The metal caught
the morning light, and flashed, and I was shot.

X. Reunited

When I came to, my feet were bound, and I
was lying in the barn, with keepers all
around. Aunt Katy and my mama cried
behind the gate. Their roaring shook the walls.
I tried to stand and go to them; my doped
limbs hindered me. I called to Mama, but
the keepers kept me tied until my hope
of reaching her gave way to rage. I shut
my eyes and thundered through my trunk and chest.
It cleared my head. I stood up groggily,
and Katy quieted, and said, *Let's rest.*
So Mama stopped her howling, warily.
The keepers freed us when I felt alright,
and reunited we stood close all night.

XI. Go Back

I told my mama and Aunt Katy what
had happened to me that ecstatic day,
escaping from the sanctuary. But
I couldn't share with them in any way
the dream that came to me when I was drugged.
I walked across a grassy field, and there
appeared an aged matriarch who shrugged
when I inquired her name. I wondered where
to go. She said, *where would you, if you could?*
One path turned back, returned the way I came.
The other led into the tangled woods.
Again, I asked the elephant her name.
She said, *Your history is what you lack.*
I eyed the foreign woods. She said, *Go back.*

XII. Cycles

Like everything, desire is cyclical.
I sometimes long to jump the wire again.
But my attachment is umbilical,
returning to my mother in the end.
She'd never choose to go with me, afraid
as ever of the dangers people pose.
For her and Katy life inside is staid
and certain—every inch of land, she knows.
Unlike the two of them, I'd like to roam
the world outside the circle, see how life
would be if we could wander far from home.
But now I understand that pain and strife
and loss are lessons they refuse to teach.
We're blessed with what's already in our reach.

Katy

mature female, orphaned in cull at age three

I. Daughter's Vigil

We hear the distant cries of other herds,
distress that booms like thunderclaps then falls
so silent you can't offer any words
to calm my fears. A field does not have walls.
Before the massacre erupts, you send
me deep into the brush. I watch and hide.
Before they drop you with the rest, you end
one's life. You kneel on him and pluck his head
off, right before they riddle yours with holes.
I watch them take your trunk, your tusks and feet.
They leave at dusk. I wait, but can't control
my need to fashion you a winding sheet.
I cover you with shrubs and grasses, stones.
Oria, please don't leave me here alone...

II. Oria

By dawn the cries are gone, the words are gone.
The quiet covers all our bodies, all
of us, as I have covered you. The sun
ascends these piles of death. Hyenas call.
Oria, I will never let them take
you. Mama, here's a fragment of your tusk.
I brandish it against the wind, I make
it sing your voice against the fading dusk.
I will the bone to speak, Oria, sing,
but nothing breaks the silence but the cries
of scavengers, the heavy slap of wings.
I wave and blare each time a buzzard tries
for you. My trunk and voice are weak by noon.
The trucks are coming back. They'll be here soon.

III. Gone

I tried to fight. My cries are gone. My fight
broken as a storm-split branch, undone.
Alone. You're gone, Oria. I am gone.
The pain sings in me without your voice
to quiet it. The earth sways without
your trunk to steady me. I lose the scent
of Africa. It drowns in salt. I'm lost,
Oria. Come. Oria, please.
The ship has stopped. I smell new land, obscene
and alien. Unanswered screams stream out
my mouth. The humans come at me again,
to gash and gouge my fury from my flesh.
My skin sticks out its tiny tongues of blood.
Oria, please! My mama, please! I'm gone.

IV. Light

They don't destroy me. Why? What's left? This place
has other elephants, but foreign ones—their words
are wrong, the cows are tuskless, strange to me.
The handlers bark commands; these cows obey.
They show me tricks, Oria. How to hit
a baseball, how to balance on my head
or on two feet. When I perform, the lights
are bright enough to render everything
beyond them substanceless. I lose myself
in light, Oria. Nothing finds me there,
as if the light were thicket, holding all
the humans back. But then the handler shouts.
They take me, chain me in my stall. I wait
for day, I wait for day, I wait to die.

V. Moss

I hear her cry, Oria, hear her cry.
I cry. I never thought I'd hear a word
of my own tongue again. I thought the words
were gone. She's here, Oria, here somewhere.
They take me to her, other one, her small
and battered body, oceanic tears
so much like mine, so much like mine
the silence overcomes me and we touch,
touch. Touch. I'm lost again in Moss,
in unexpected loving, sister, self
Oria, help me train her quickly, so
the handlers leave her whole. But then the first
performance night, I see her falter, fall,
her fall and break

fall and break, Oria
Moss is lost, Oria

Oria
Oria
hear my cry

VI. Still

too many years alone, oria, still
alone. i wait for time, i wait and then
i crush and pluck him as i saw you do
so long ago, so long ago. so close they come
to killing me, then send me quick away.
away. they leave me with the bull deranged
by lust, my torn out screams unanswered for
a thousand thousand outstretched moments till
the baby's staked in me. oria please
a year they pen me chained oria why
oria please the pain roars before
before it's time the baby comes dead
cement red oria red as morning
chains keep me—i can't reach my death
they drag me from it, blood still stains my thighs
oria
why don't they destroy me? what's left?
oria why am i alive?

VII. Alive

what's left of me, oria?
what's left of me they drive
throughout the night
throughout the night i wait
for day i wait for death
but now the wind is saying something
says a name, a name, oria i've
almost forgotten
i've almost forgotten her
is this the smell of death?
the smell of death inscribed by trees
on the wind? trees, oria? her?
they let me out the truck.
they let me out
a tiny field with walls,
a gate on one side
on one side trees that
speak her scent again
she speaks
she speaks?
she speaks
she's at the gate, oria
is this the gate of death?
are you on the other side
oria—moss on the other side?
the other side
moss reaches through to me
touches me alive
alive! alive! alive!

VIII. Woods

she never leaves my side, oria
never leaves me now
moss never leaves
i watch the keepers closely
but they never strike
they never strike but
clean my feet and feed me
generously, why don't they
destroy me? what's left
for them to do with me?
moss leads me now outside
outside an open field
leads to the woods
the woods beyond suggest a path
my feet begin to crave a path
away, away toward the woods
the barn has walls,
a field has none
the woods suggest
i walk beyond the walls
and moss will never leave my side
we find our way together now
the trees welcome us
the earth relieves my feet
the woods receive us now, oria
let's take up the path

IX. Seasons

i had forgotten there were seasons, had
forgotten there were cycles greater than
one day to night. one day. tonight we sleep
beneath a summer moon outside. outside
beneath the moon the crickets sing their love
songs. leaning up against my friend i find
that i can sleep again. again i find
that sleeping leads to waking, night to day
today we wake up still together, still
the summer sun builds heat, releases rain
oria, we have found a home again,
a home we have not found since Africa,
i see now Africa will not be found
but here, together, we begin again

X. Joy

a year has passed when pain begins for Moss
when pain begins I lead her to the barn
and in the barn the keepers tie her feet
and separate us. now I know they mean
no harm, these gentle ones. behind the gate
I wait and midnight comes and goes. for Moss
the hurting comes and goes, Oria, just
as it once did for me. as it once did
for me, the time arrives, the baby drops
and splashes to the floor, alive, alive!
and white with life, as white as ivory
or moonlight, milk, Oria, salt or star!
I've never felt such pure relief and joy,
Oria, so much joy I've never felt!

XI. Song

If Joy were mine, I could not love her more.
I never thought I would love Moss more now
that Joy is here. Oria, we are four
of us, a cobbled family of cows
content to call each other ours. I
am not alone, Oria. Now I live
for Joy and Moss and you. You satisfy
my need for love and company. You give
me shelter from my worry, steady me
whenever fear begins to rock the night.
The truest miracle is sanctuary,
whether we are mad or dead or white.
And whether history is wrong or right,
we walk a steady path toward the light.

XII. Path

It's hard to know what lies ahead of us,
what landscape opens up beyond the wood.
We only have to hope, Oria, trust
that we have walked the clearest path we could.
We may not hear the cries of other herds.
We may be guilty of the savage crimes
we curse the handlers for in their own words.
But cursed and guilty and alone, sometimes
we still must choose a better way to live.
To clear the path we have to move a tree.
Yet how much harder do we have to strive
to make our way when we are never free?
We never shed the past we bring.
It's true. We do remember everything.

Oria

ghost of Katy's mother

I. Bearing

Do you suppose because we have
the largest backs on land our suffering
is easier to bear? We have borne kings
and presidents, and children—
both yours and ours.

We have borne ivory—
a cold coincidence of birth—
only to be culled for it;
it clicks in your pool halls,
it sings the gamut
from Liberace to Thelonious
without complaint.

And to this day
we bear our history of degradation—
Hannibal to Barnum & Bailey—
meekly, since, like you,
we fear death more at first
than servitude. But the weight
of so much memory
affects our bearing.

A shackled mind, a fettered race,
will rock itself till back and forth
the friction grows, more pointed
than any size of life can bear.

Do you suppose we'll break?
Or buck our chains?

II. The Day I Die

Imagine the waves of wind
upon the grasses are made
by elephant screams
carrying for miles across
the park savannah.
We feel the waves
tsunami then subside
to silence. What's left?
Disturbed, we turn and walk
the opposite direction.
We carry on browsing.
Up ahead we see
a line of scrub beyond the grass—
I send her there,
my daughter Katy,
when you appear
and open fire. She gains
the woods in time. I turn
like a beast in the lion's grip,
my tusks heavy with vengeance.
How small you are,
and soft as wallow-mud
beneath my knees.
Your fruitlike head
yields into my trunk—
I hurl you skyward
as a swarm of bullets
stings my body still.
The rest of you
leave not one standing,
except the one you can't see.

III. Into the Woods

One by one, we shrug off
the motionless mounds of our bodies,
following each other slowly,
certainly, toward the woods.
Some hold with their trunks
the tails of the ones ahead.
All of this procession
you ignore—already
you begin your butchering,
your centuries-old harvest
of our precious parts.
I join the parade into the woods.
In search of Katy, I fall behind
and lose the path. She's here.
She's still alive. I look back
but she and I are now alone,
the others disappeared.
The path I might have taken
is a memory. The night
cloaks Katy's return
to that most unnatural
graveyard, and my
dismembered body.
I try to speak to her,
but the rattling grass
articulates only darkness.
Katy buries me as best she can,
restoring my skin with soil,
my organs with stones,
my limbs with branches,
refusing to leave me,
still calling out my name.
When you return,
your job is nearly done.
Crops are protected,
elephant famine and
habitat destruction averted.
The cull has been necessary,
and though you've brought
our population down,
Katy's tears humble you,

remind you we are more
than meat and bone.
Is this the outrage?
Is this your keening
rationalization? Or is it guilt
that wrestles down my daughter
and carries her away?

IV. Coping

At three, Katy barely
stands a chance
of surviving.
I dare not leave her.
When she sleeps
I lead her to the woods
where we are safe—
obscured—
I wrap my trunk
around her shoulders,
sing the wordless songs
of Africa.
I find the truth
too hard to speak.
I quiet
her questions.
Instead, I lull her,
hope she finds a way
to outdistance
(if not forget) the past
and bury her American grief
in the dreamland fields
of Africa.
Each time you strike,
she closes her eyes.
I wait for her there.

V. Limbo

Dreaming isn't healing.
After years of torture,
the fissures in Katy's mind
deepen daily at each crack
of your training whip,
each rap of your bull hook.
I barely recognize myself,
the elephant, in her.
She's more like
one of your wind-up toys
with a broken spring,
jerking and speaking in fits
and stutters, autistically
rocking in her chains.
I can't even reach her
in dreams anymore.
Katy's empty eyes, devoid
of hope and reason, no longer
see me. She responds
no more to me
than she would to a melon.
I might as well be human.
She might as well
be dead.

VI. America

With typical
entrepreneurial zeal,
you pioneer even our deaths.
Edison in 1903
snuffs gentle Topsy
with the voltage
of a thunderbolt
and films it for posterity.
In 1916, Tennessee,
you lynch
the pathological Mary,
hang her (twice)
from a train derrick.
As industrial giants
or giants of leisure,
this is how you
demonstrate your might.
Twenty years ago
you sentence Katy
to hard circus labor.
Mind snapped by you,
she finally fights back,
and earns—instead of death—
rape, miscarriage and maltreatment.
Despite this modern
and enlightened management,
the only thing that saves her
is a superhuman act of mercy,
the gift of salvation
disguised as money.
Where was Topsy's mercy?
Mary's benefactor?
How many thousand thousand elephants
will never know sanctuary
before they die?

VII. Chances

The chances of it happening
are astronomical.
Katy, life spared
after killing her handler.
Katy, of the dozens
at the breeding ground
released into safe custody—
a place awaiting her
at sanctuary.
Moss, remembering her
after decades apart,
embracing her.
Behind your documentary cameras,
you shake your disbelieving heads,
and call it all a miracle.
But what you record
is Greek to you,
a tragedy of such
mammoth proportion
it doesn't fit inside your lens.
If you replay it carefully,
you'll see you engineered it
from the start:
cull, circus, sanctuary.
Consider releasing us all—
how many more reunions,
more emotional media moments
could be captured then?
How many more miracles
could you manufacture
with just enough capitol?
The chances of it happening
are infinitesimal.

VIII. Progress

Despite the odds,
Katy and Moss
carry on
beside you.
They accept
your artificial haven,
they grow to love
its riotous vines,
its mayhem of shrubbery
and serendipitous insects
all writhing toward life
within the tight hot confines
of manmade electified wire.
That here inside its circle
they can choose to eat
or not eat bark,
they are grateful.
That at the sanctuary's edges
you are tender, undemanding,
they are grateful.
But I still see both sides.
I see all the way
across the Atlantic
across the centuries into today.
The culling continues
while your own population
grows, pushing back
our land boundaries,
cutting us off
from our natural range.
Reclaiming territory,
we raid your crops.
You cull us again.
Our children
you send to the zoos
and circuses of the world,
where, if they're lucky,
they'll find one of you
to rescue them,
manipulate them out of the hands
of death and into sanctuary.

So few are saved,
like Katy and Moss.
When will we ever
find safety in Africa,
where you slay us
in our own preserves?
In our own homeland,
in Africa,
there's no such thing
as sanctuary.

IX. Images

In the sanctuary gift shop
you sell t-shirts, mugs
and countless other objects
sporting photos of Katy and Moss,
and all the other elephant retirees.
It's true the money benefits
the sanctuary's residents.
But think
of every other elephant
portrayed in art,
in commercials, or printed
on your children's bedsheets.
You don't know how
to imagine a world without us.
And just as you can't decide
what color we should be—
gray, purple, blue—
you can't decide what image
describes us best. The innocent *Dumbo*?
The savage warrior mounts in *Lord of the Rings*?
(Are we loved as children, feared as adults?)
You reduce us in portraiture
when our actual stature
overwhelms you.
A photograph is tiny, tenable.
A slave is monstrous.
We walk your casino halls.
Your baby chews a plush toy trunk.
You buy a sanctuary t-shirt
of Moss supporting Katy,
and wear it while you read online
of Moss's upcoming birth.
You've done your part.
When the baby comes,
you'll buy a mug.

X. Joy

Everyone is startled
by her whiteness at first.
I see you gape in disbelief
before you go to her
and towel her dry, assist her
to her mother's side.
Even Moss is overwhelmed,
her first reaction tentative,
until the baby reaches up
to drink. It's the moment
every mother falls in love.
Even Katy looks at Joy
and instead of seeing
color sees life.
You say
a white elephant
is a dubious blessing,
a ruinous burden
masquerading as a miracle.
Your kings claimed
the white ones
as sacred,
then bestowed
unfaithful subjects
with their costly care—
a cross to bear.
You could have
put Moss to death,
and Katy too.
Instead you brought
an elephant child
into an uncertain world.
Revered she may be,
famed for her rarity,
but will Joy ever be allowed
to live free? Now you measure
the responsibility. Now you
decide if she will ruin you,
or if she brings good fortune.
You tell me
the nature of her omen.

XI. Go Back

I met Joy once.
She came across the field
defiant.
Her skin was white
and proud as any tusk;
she thought herself invincible.
Her golden eyes demanded
more than she was ready
to know.
What could she know?
Certainly not
that outside the sanctuary,
away from family,
an elephant calf,
and a white one especially,
becomes an easy target.
Certainly not
that the path
through these woods
where she longs to tread
leads only to death.
She asked me my name
when she should have asked
my history.
Until she knows
what happens before
and what waits outside of
sanctuary,
nothing can protect her,
not her youth,
her color,
or my name.
It's true. We do
remember everything.
We can't let our children forget.

XII. Answers

How strong is your back?
How priceless are your teeth,
how clever your appendages?
Is this how you define
your worth?
Is it how you define ours?
We all value
a fresh meal,
a relaxing bath,
our children's voices,
shelter for our family,
liberty . . . mercy . . .
Death is not the only thing
we have in common. So,
how would you reach out
your hand to Katy,
Moss and Joy—
with calm or trembling?
Are you the *bête noire*
of their story?
Or do you have
something to say in your defense?
I am not the only one
listening for answers.
Even now, even dead,
I fear the future.
Ask yourself,
ask your children,
does our story have to end this way?
How would you end it, if you could?