

## JENNY PENBERTHY / Canine Kin: Sharon Thesen's "Animals"

I like dogs well enough though wouldn't own to being a dog person. Even so, I keep returning to Sharon Thesen's poem "Animals" with its compact and rich depiction of co-existence between species. And so, a "token" for Sharon.

### Animals

When I come out of the bathroom  
animals are waiting in the hall  
and when I settle down to read  
an animal comes between me  
and my book and when I put on  
a fancy dinner, a few animals  
are under the table staring at the guests,  
and when I mail a letter  
or go to the Safeway there's always  
an animal tagging along  
or crying left at home and when I get  
home from work animals leap joyously  
around my old red car so I feel like  
an avatar with flowers & presents all over  
her body and when I dance around  
the kitchen at night wild & feeling  
lovely as Margie Gillis, the animals  
try to dance too, they stagger on  
back legs and open their mouths, pink  
and black and fanged, and I take their paws  
in my hands and bend towards them,  
happy and full of love.

It occurs to me that “Animals” may be a reply to the following well-known section of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained,  
I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.  
So they show their relations to me, and I accept them,  
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.

This is from the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The 1855 version, “I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals . . .,” is revised in the 1856 version to “I think I could turn and live with animals.” Curiously, the drafts of Thesen’s poem record a similar revision. An early version of the poem<sup>1</sup> is titled “The Animals” with lines 1-2 reading, “When I come out of the bathroom / the animals are waiting in the hall”; a subsequent draft shows the article in the title and in line 2 scored through. The definite article—*the* animals—particularizes, exceptionalizes, refers to those special animals, the speaker’s pets; “animals” on its own de-familiarizes and invokes a larger, wilder category—species, families, kingdom. Thesen weighed the difference as Whitman did before her and made the critical deletion.

Her poem offers a gloss on Whitman’s—a sample of human life actually lived with animals, fanged and in the kitchen. Several of Thesen’s poems document her perception of a peopled and ‘animal-ed’ urban landscape, sites of co-habitation, home to companion species: the dogs that “bark from behind fences / or from a spot on the sofa / with good visibility between the drapes” (“The Shroud of Turin,” *Beginning of the Long Dash* 55); the “leashed falsettos / of an urban dogfight” (“Sitting Around at Night Trying to Watch TV,” *A Pair of Scissors* 17); “The animal [that] puzzles / over

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1 Thanks to Tony Power for help with the Sharon Thesen Archive in the Contemporary Literature Collection at the SFU Library (Burnaby, BC).

an unfamiliar thing. Made of foam rubber" ("The Drift," *The Beginning of the Long Dash* 47); the "paddling / old and sandy muzzled sneezing wagging creature" ("gala roses," *Aurora* 69): etc. Animals are an integral part of the landscape.

Walking home after supper at Maria's  
Our sons are men  
Our dogs plod slowly on uncertain hips  
Our mothers need to move from one sort of place  
to another ("Night Falling," *A Pair of Scissors* 16)

Both Whitman and Thesen propose kinship between human and animal species. Animals are in our DNA, our dreams, our fates, our poems. Whitman's poem, written before the publication of *The Origin of the Species* (1859), suggests an instinctive recognition of the co-evolution of species. Both he and Thesen offer figures of ancestry.

We recognize Thesen's animals as dogs, but the poem wants us to remember they are animals. Her interviews and poems allude to a necessary relationship between wildness and sanity:

...it's the direction in which the mind of our culture is headed....Kill those wolves! Build those mega-malls! Meantime everyone goes crazier, day by day, in front of their TV sets. (Rooke 17)

...I believe sanity is the social and psychological equivalent of what [Gary] Snyder calls "the wild": as Snyder says, "interconnected, interdependent, incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information." Snyder says a poem is a "creature of the wild mind." By "wild" and "sane" I mean elegant, complex, subtle, and clear as a bell even as it must muddy the waters of the given.

(Marlatt 13)

Thesen would surely echo dog-crazy Donna Haraway's assertion in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, that "beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not pre-exist their relatings" (6). Relationship is co-constitutive. "Co-habiting does not mean fuzzy and touchy-feely...Relationship is multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential" (Haraway 30).

"Animals" resists nostalgia for an untamed wilderness that preceded the decline into culture. It's a poem about the ongoing and extraordinary fact of species-dependence and co-habitation. Animals and people "are bonded in significant otherness" (Haraway 16). The reader of Thesen's disarming poem watches rapt as the speaker, holding the paws of animals dancing clumsily on two legs, bends towards them with frank and simple emotion. The moment is "[d]iverse, ancient, and full of information" (Snyder qtd. in Thesen xxx) and recalls lines from other poems: "The animals ring us / in our sleep" ("What life awaits us," *Beginning of the Long Dash* 62), "Citizens asleep in bedrooms / try to kill snakes in dreams" "Calendar Picture for the Month of June," *A Pair of Scissors* 5), and "Faces nearly human / in the woods" ("Dangerous," *Aurora* 21). Scenes of myth and transformation crowd the kitchen where domesticated dogs mimic their former selves (the "wild" dance) and play the role of the responsive dance partner of fairy tales. The speaker of another poem "tell[s] the dog he is a good boy" ("Clematis Montana Rubus," *A Pair of Scissors* 25). Beauty and the Beast. The "avatar" (line 14) is the Hindu deity transformed and manifested in human form. Transmogrification is in the air, but there's no literary deployment of metaphors yoking the species. It's the literal that reverberates, generating mythic echoes. Traces of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—relationships full of fraud and subterfuge—are substituted with images of domestic routine and rapport.

Thesen avoids Creeley's device in "The Dogs of Auckland," for instance, where observed dogs, kicked and abused, make way for his arch use of an inevitable metaphor: "I am the Dog." Animals have long played a service role for poets. Eliot Weinberger could be speaking for any number of literary animals when he notes that "William Blake's 'tyger,' according to the exegetes, stands for wrath, revolution, untamed energy and beauty, the romantic revolt of imagination against reason" (50). Donna Haraway protests, "Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with..." (5). In Thesen's poems, dogs are dogs.

Whitman's experience of animals affirms the bond between humans and animals. He knows himself better for knowing them: "They bring [him] tokens / of [him]self." Thesen's relation to animals is self-affirming in quite different ways. She may be enjoying the joke of offering "tokens of [her]self" to her ecstatic dogs—"Like / an avatar with flowers & presents all over / her body"—but there is no feigned knowledge of the other in her poem. Gertrude Stein's identity investigation comes to mind:

I am I because my little dog knows me, even if the little dog is a big one, and yet the little dog knowing me does not really make me be I no not really because after all being I I am I has really nothing to do with the little dog knowing me....  
No one knowing me knows me. (593)

The dog's recognition does little to crack the code of otherness. Difference survives love. Thesen's poem boldly tackles what Donna Haraway calls "relations of significant otherness" (8). "Animals" tells it as it is without irony, ambiguity, or conceit. "I take their paws / in my hands and bend towards them, / happy and full of love"—no infantilized relationship here or cloying allusion to an economy of "unconditional love." The poem is an unsentimental document that evokes spontaneous celebration and awe.

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Sharon and Oreo  
*Photographer unidentified*