

Bone Monkey

Also by Janet Sutherland

Burning the Heartwood
Hangman's Acre

Janet Sutherland

*Bone
Monkey*

Shearsman Books

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Nearly to the axletrees in sand

I awoke from a sound sleep
the pitching and tossing

had ceased
and now stuck fast

in opal light
we opened our mouths

amphibious children
of the night

to let the cold come in
our voices strange

even to us
who have been used

to travelling dangerously
Ge thouu, geshvinkt thouu

as we were taught
we entreat them

at last the farm horses
buck and leap with teeth bared

and shivering
gain a firm purchase

“the shadow” represents all that is instinctive in us. Whatever has a tail and lots of hair is in the shadow... Old cave impulses go there, longings to eat the whole world...”

Robert Bly, *A little Book on the Human Shadow*

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A little rhyme before sleep

Roiled by wind and the undertow of tide
the river raises snakes that writhe and glide.
Headlights from the bridge and street lamps
on both banks silver the ridges on their spines
and gild their flanks. Where are they going
on this bleak November night? In whose house
will they gather when the dark runs out?

Up the stairs they slither to the sleeper in his bed—
the slack jawed drowser who has nothing in his head.

*All I dream is water
leaf green brown
I open my mouth
I choke I drown*

Prequel

Out of the void of chaos came the Earth
and then Bone Monkey sprang to life.
Three strands of darkness and a streak of light
were wound inside his head. His heart
made what it could of that. At least it chattered on
in rhythm with the shrieks of other forms
dragged from the reek and mire to consciousness.
Faced with this fait accompli what to do?
He's dissident the moment he takes breath.
The other creatures formulate a knowing god
and stand or lie in awe of her. And start to sing.
The noise is indescribable. He reaches past
this schism, starts to laugh—he's laughing
on a mud ball spinning through the dark.

The Blacksmith made me

With blazing tongs he clamped my head
and cut it off, sliced up my flesh and jointed me.
As big as half the earth, a cauldron hung above his fire.
He threw me in the pot to make his stew.

So three years passed—I simmered and my fat
rose to the surface and was skimmed away.

Next day he ladled out my bones and working fast
he put them in his fire below the coals
and when I blanched and spat he took me
to his anvil and he struck three massive blows.

And then I sang. I was a bell
and when he plunged me in his trough I was the sea.

The blacksmith made me who I am. He took
my naked bones and covered them. My skull was bare,
his iron hand put in obsidian eyes and lanced my ears,
so down through all the years I'd imitate the speech of man.

Red Hibiscus

Once as Bone Monkey walked the forest paths
a travelling man appeared and spoke to him.

Which of these packets will you have? He asked,
raising two parcels for our friend to choose.

The first was large, imposing, wrapped in leaves
and dressed with a red hibiscus bloom.

*This one has knives, a looking glass and beads
paper and ink, cloth, all you could need.*

The other package swung from his little finger
wrapped in rough cloth and smaller than his thumb.

Immortal Life he said, *is held within
and you can take which bundle you would like.*

I'll have the largest, please Bone Monkey said
and straightaway unwrapped the gift,

picked out the prettiest knife, to test the blade,
and plunged it in his benefactor's chest.

I'll take the smallest too, he told his host
and stole it from the dead man's open palm.

**Skull bowl decorated with a silver band
repoussé monkey heads and Latin script**

I was dead and have returned
to life, profane and virtuous
my bones were cleansed,
but still, unhealed, I stalk the earth.

**Male écorché leaning against a tree
exposing the anatomy of thorax and left breast**

François Jallat 1545

It could be a self portrait, Bone Monkey thinks,
as he considers the picture in its glass case.

He likes the attitude the man has struck
as he holds his peeled skin away from his chest,

his air of worldliness, his open smile,
his calm acceptance of nakedness.