

A night scene with a yellow moon in the dark sky. Below the moon, the text "Reflections by Moonlight from an African Pond" is written in a yellow, serif font. The background is a dark, blurry image of a pond at night. In the foreground, two white cows are visible, their forms slightly out of focus. The bottom portion of the image is a solid blue color.

Reflections by Moonlight
from an African Pond

poems by H. Palmer Hall

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Cover art adapted from a screen capture
taken at Pete's pond:
"The Elephant Young One Talks Back"

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for All the Pondies

Dancing Elephants

This was not Fed Astaire and Ginger Rogers.
They had less grace, less sense of style:
two elephants, one large, the other small
not a baby, maybe two thirds the other's size

wheeled in circles for a while, their trunks
stroked each other's sides and heads and
intertwined just once. An act of love?
Or an act of art? They circled to the right,

clockwise, nimble footwork for their weight.
And after a minute, maybe two, they stopped
the dance and walked together into the night.
Two elephants in the African night, dancing

to some rhythm we cannot know, acting
out some urge they graced us with the chance
to see, some ancient urge, built in perhaps,
Some ritual played out in the dark night.

Falling Rain

Rain falls on the Mashatu Game Reserve,
wakes Afke in her tent. We see lightning
spark the sky into flaring balls and sheets
of rain sweep across the pond. And yet,

it is not the right season. It should be dry.
Dust should be blowing along the shore.
Things have turned around, upside down
in the arid country that is Botswana.

No elephants come to drink, no jackals—
they have found water everywhere.
And yet—a giraffe died giving birth,
weakened by long drought, they suspect.

Perhaps even this rainy week came too late.
Perhaps there can not be too much water
to drink, too much grass to eat. This is
the animals' communion, their life. Rain falls.

Sunset in Mashatu

—for Marc and Cheryl

Sunset in Mashatu, the end of a day
that saw elephants and zebras, vervets
and, in the late night, a streak of a genet.
But with morning zebras came to the pond.

The day of the zebra dawned at, well,
after 9 p.m. central time—only a small herd,
just five or six—improbable beasts
for those of us reared with horses and cows—

still, wildebeests and warthogs make
all things possible. Even Disney
could not have designed a wildebeest and
the warthogs' tusks are misplaced by more

than just a hair. Then there's the gentle giraffe
designed, perhaps, to nibble leaves, but the neck!—
good lord, even the ostrich cannot stretch
that far—as long as a genet's over-evolved tail.

And the antsy antelope—mild-mannered
four-legged creatures created to be prey:
vegetarians, vegans, not high on the great
chain of being, in the pecking order

of anyone's veldt just more notches
on some lioness's belt. This universe demands
some recompense: for lack of beauty and logic,
for the sacrifice of the weak to the strong.

But this day was mostly about zebras who stayed
at the pond from dawn to the setting of the sun.
Just another day in a place as magical as Oz—
A place where striped zebras walk beside a pond.

The Golden Mean

The thing about this female waterbuck emerging from the thick green brush is that her head and longish neck seem much too big for Euclid's golden mean.

I mean a head so large, a neck so thick with all that heavy fur was made for Nordic, animals, for elk and caribou. And, the fat along her sides protects—from desert heat?

Much misplaced, the waterbuck, behind a stork with piercing bill, shakes her head and lifts her hoof, careful, not wanting to ignore a teasing Snark or Bandersnatch, some carnivore

that might have set up camp along the shore. Seeing naught, she lowers her head to drink—but slowly, cautiously. She seems to think some mythic beast, hidden in the trees, might slink.

Terrapins at Work

And what have they brought you,
 my lady, my dear,
The terrapins returning from a day
 on the mere?
And what have they bought with all
 of their labor
To bring back to the castle and share
 with their neighbor?

Why a fish just for eating and weeds from the deep—
A snack for the cam operator before she must sleep.

Consider the terrapin, swimming all day,
 his home
On his back, his head now tucked away,
 he swims
Not for joy, he hunts not for gold,
 but for fish
And for fortune in weeds, muck and cold.
 He rests

From his labor, gives the lady her due, then crawls
Onto shore to rest for the morning, his spirit renew.

Cam operators' jobs are never done

She sweeps the cam both left and right
Looking for this looking for that
An elephant's trunk, a cat in a hat,
A Jabberwok, a Hortonish Who, a sight

To beguile the watching blog: a hog
With tusks, a writhing snake,
A monitor lizard who's stayed awake,
Perhaps a mock turtle or enchanted frog

Sitting on a toadstool in the waning light.
But there's nothing there, not a single thing
So we turn up the sound to hear the birds sing
And wait again for the African night.

How to Call a Lion

Or: The African Calling Song

A warning first to be careful in your call:
You may have a favorite at the pond, an animal
You would hate to see have a really good
Close-up view of some hungry lion's maw.

Calling a lion is not a difficult thing to do
Just go to Africa, some place like Mashatu,
And stand upon the shore of a watering place
(I don't mean your local bar), a pond-ish space

"Where the deer and the antelope play"...a song?
Or wildebeest or zebra or even, no, this is wrong
But even, gasp!, the thought of monkey tartar
Breaks me into hives! But if, after this, you long

To see a lion pride race across the veldt and hunt
Your favorite animals with tooth and claw,
And cubs swat each other with their paws,
Then, my dears, it's simple: you must shunt

Aside your squeamishness and sing in a voice
You would never use in school...if I had a choice
I would wait for the lions, but we are too hasty
And want the lions to come (impala are so tasty)

When we would have them come, but I digress,
Where was I...oh, in a loud voice, but stay in tune—
Make it like a Bing Crosby or a Tony Bennet croon—
“Come, come, come to the pond...” Oh? What? Yes?

Sorry, all...an eland called to tell me this is wrong.
No one should be taught the African Calling Song
For it's a secret shared by a selected, priestly few
To protect the ruminants from the predator crew.

Sweet Water

Young elephants trumpet and spray water
into the air, add a hint of grace to the soil
only hours after storms pass over the bush.
Can we doubt the sheer joy, the exuberance
Of the moment, the smell of the fresh air,
The taste of rain-freshened, sweet water?

Listen to them as they leave, trunks lifted,
trumpeting into the approaching dark—
out of sight, now, but not out of hearing
and never out of mind. Look at them
as they walk away, tails swishing, so large,
so graceful, dancing into the African night.

The Old Bull

The wrinkles on his back are hieroglyphs—
each tells the story of his years:
the young ellie walking beneath the belly
of his dam, the first pain of emerging tusks,
the difficult drama of mastering muscles
in his trunk to drink, to spray water
on his back. First rut and mating.

Each wrinkle speaks of this and that. And,
now alone, he stands on a peninsula jutting out
into a small pond, almost surrounded
by the water of life, then turns on the rocky
spit and, trunk waving, walks away,

For the Yellow-Billed Storks

—for *Martha Reno*

Tiring of yellow-billed storks,
she turns the cam to terrapins
and shows their climb to shore.
Like an early Paul Simon song:
they are rocks, they are islands
and sometimes just a small snack
for a hungry, though fat, crocodile.
I suppose they do feel pain
And are less rockish than they look.

I once, I confess, had turtle soup—
not mock turtle, like Alice had—
real turtle, from the sea, and, yes,
a bit like guinea hens, a little gamey.
But that was when the world was young
and Ridleys were thought plentiful
and, then, when the world warmed
It was summer and wonderful and natural.

Storks, like the yellow-billed,
Seemed to nest in such odd places:
chimneys in Amsterdam, where
they brought good luck while
bringing babies to good families.
We did not know where bad parents
found theirs—perhaps from a patch
of cabbages, hidden under leaves.

Demanding more in the stiff breeze

The wind is strong tonight,
blows ripples across the pond,
makes trees wave. We demand
that each stalk of grass be more—
some animal about to emerge,
some tall bird taking flight.

No rain this time, only cool breezes
to rock that old cradle, that source
of almost everything, that Africa
that beckons with broken limbs,
with fruit forbidden millennia ago,
fruit we took and ate and lost all.

Soon, ah soon, the sun will rise
and the thorn bush will be filled
with golden, downy weavers and
geese and herons and plovers
will walk along the windy shore.
We should ask for nothing more.

A faint blue tint in dark water
promises light to come, the sun
will paint the sky a golden red
and we will ask for even more.
We are those who walk on two legs.
We are not content with mere beauty.

A Prayer for the Mashatu Game Reserve

(in Sonnet form)

“Nature’s first green is gold.”

—Robert Frost

All the grassy green is going--out there beyond
the banks we always see. Leaves begin to fall
for want of rain. And so, we hear the call,
of elephants and jackals, of bird life at the pond
and see more and more red in this once lush place.
Dust blows when the winds rise. Impala race
in the leaden moon of night skies, turn to face
dry breezes. Not even dew lends a hint of grace.

We ask for storms to sweep once more across the land,
to fill low-lying areas with that gift of silvery streams
that pulse into dying grass, to swirl into this arid curse
of parched land, to trickle down into sterile sand
and coax golden blades to ripen once more to deep green
and swell into fecundity. Come rains—heal this thirst.

Stuck Again

So, the cam is stuck once more
And we can see beyond this shore
out into the dark beneath the trees.
No animals move, no hint of a breeze
To make the water ripple, rustle leaves.

Somehow more threatening in the night
this scene, the flicker of artificial light
shows only insects, the green of thick grass.
We hear grunts, hear something, no sight
Of elephants, of last night's zebra, eland

Perhaps elephants are on their way
To stretch their trunks down to spray
Water on their backs or into the night air,
Not caring that they're out of range
Not knowing that we sit and stare,

Or lions, quiet, no huffing, no roaring,
just striding to and fro, but now boring,
Out of camera range. The zebras first came
Back to this same spot last night at just
This time amidst a herd of eland. The same

Place a genet raced across from left to right,
his tail marking what he was, well, this site
is a common stopping place for the cam
and better than many where it could light
and stay for all the hours of Botswana's night.

Less than an hour until dawn and blue skies—
Until volunteers wake up, leave their tents, sigh
At seeing just this shade of blue and glance out
Across the pond to see what waits them—a new day
To tend the cam, to search for animals and birds,

To some small part of what Mashatu has to offer
To viewers so many miles away, who have sat
This long night, watching just a small arc
Of the pond in dark and now here bird song
And sense the approach of a new dawn.

For hours of enjoyment watching African animals without having them imprisoned in a zoo, visit Pete's Pond on the Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana, Africa:

<http://ngm.com/wildcamafrika>

Thanks to all the cam operators who bring us new delights each day and to Pete Le Roux who created the pond to help prevent poaching along the Limpopo River.

