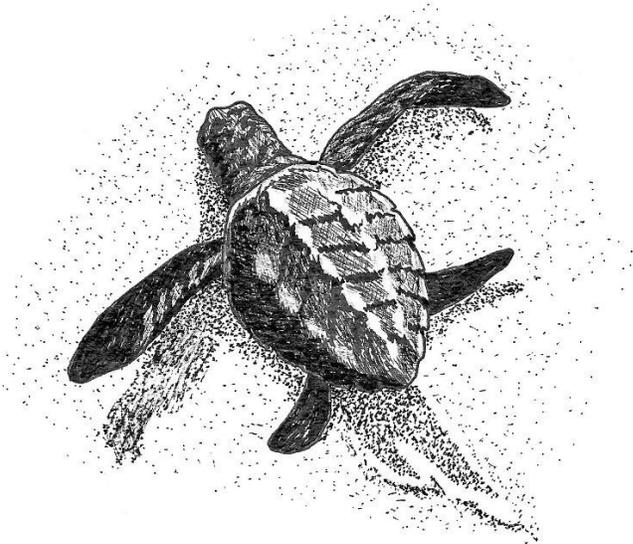


METAMORPHOSES

by Janet Ruth

I.

*Deep beneath the sandy strand,
a clutch of leathery eggs begins to move.
Baby sea turtles use a tiny tooth
on their snouts, called a caruncle, to escape
the only oval world they have ever known.
When the shells crack, sand pours in.
These fierce Jurassic survivors determine
which way is up, swim through sand,
erupt en masse with their siblings
onto a dark beach high above the waves.
Separated from their new surging,
receding home,
they face almost insurmountable obstacles—
night-heron, crab, raccoon, and dog predators prowl,
mountainous sand dunes stretch across their paths,
beachfront lighting lures them away from
the relative safety of the sea.*



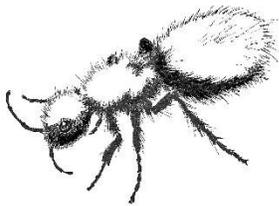
*Even if they reach the ocean,
challenges remain—
fish lurk beneath the surface,
incoming waves dump them back onto the beach,
only one in a thousand survives to adulthood.
But they keep on swimming, through waves,
through time, toward the day
decades away, when they will return
to this birthing beach
to repeat the ancient cycle.*

Transitions, transformations, migrations,
repeated many times.
Some were faced with excitement,
some with uncertainty or fear.
I could barely imagine where I was going,
how I would get there—
middle school to “the big high school”
with older, scary kids,
high school to college in another state,
saying goodbye to my parents
in an industrial-green room in North Hall
with a roommate I’d never met,
move to Washington, D.C., small town
Pennsylvania girl transplanted in the city,
catching a bus from Kalorama Road downtown,
often the only white person riding,
back home with no idea of what or where
I wanted to be, interim job painting barns,
first apartment on my own,
return to D.C., partly to be with a boyfriend
who, when I arrived, told me
he had “moved on.” Pain obliterated excitement.
Should I accept my friend’s offer to drive down,
take me home? Where *was* home?

But I stayed;
worked for a Congressman, enrolled in grad school,
got a job with Fish and Wildlife Service,
moved to Colorado, became a research scientist,
married Dave, moved to New Mexico.

And here I am,
facing the next transitions.
Retirement and aging—
time to explore new lives, new voices,
yet, loss of work identity,
loss of youth, burgeoning wrinkles,
where *do* these wiry, silver hairs come from?
Same old excitement
same old fears.

II.



.....

*A fuzzy, orange velvet ant,
solitary,
scurries busily across the sand,
first one direction, then she doubles back.
I want to trace her trail,
see where she's going;
wonder how she decides what path to take,
what she's looking for.*

*Bushtits—tiny, feathered insectivores—
employ a different strategy.
Family group travels as one.
Dozens of individuals fly a trapline
around the neighborhood in winter,
looking for food.
Who decides where to go?
is it always the same one leading?*

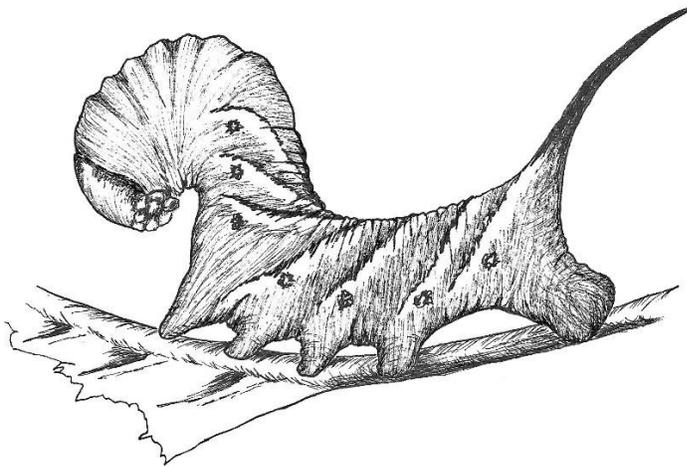
I spread the map of my life on a rock,
try to determine where I am,
where I've come from, where I'm going.
I trace my path through the past
to this point in the present, this intersection

with multiple trails into the future.
I look around for someone
to give me directions.
There is no one.

How do I find the way to growing older?
I wish I'd asked my mother.
My body changes, gradually
more aches, more wrinkles,
more salt-and-pepper waves.
I still *feel* young,
convinced that Facebook classmates
are older than I am.

A map is of minimal use
without a destination,
good only for showing me
possible routes,
highlighting topographic line—
mountains, cliffs, canyons—
obstacles over, around,
or through which I must maneuver,
once I decide where I am going.

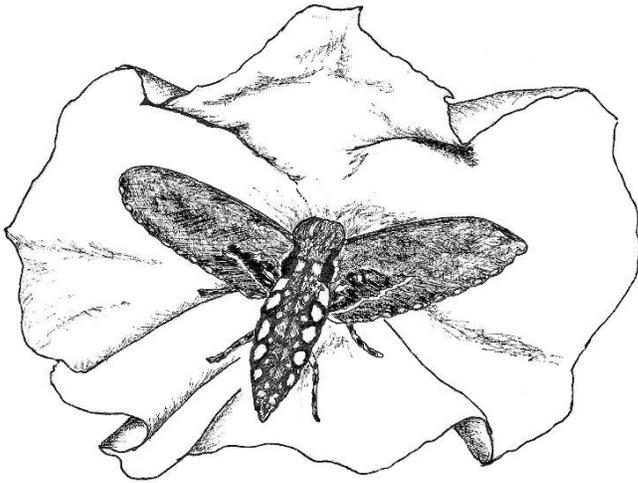
III.



*The caterpillar in green, black, and white
striped pajamas, with curved horn,
has spent a lifetime eating.*

*It consumes all the leaves from
a tomato plant universe on my patio,
where its mother laid an egg and left it
to its own devices.*

*Knowing nothing else,
it buries itself in the soil,
wraps itself in the casket of a chrysalis.
But death is really just metamorphosis,
a portal to what's next.*



*From the grave
a sphinx moth is resurrected.
Damp wings of pink, cream, and brown
extend and dry,
lift the transformed caterpillar
into a new world of flight—
six-legged “hummingbird of the night.”
A coiled proboscis probes for
a new diet of nectar.*

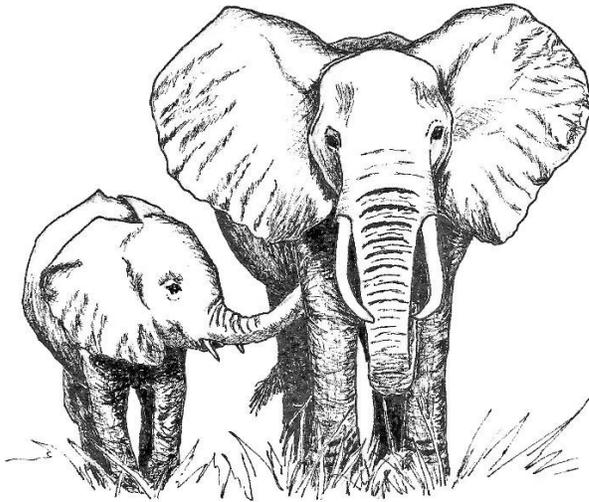
Who will I become?
Fear of the unknown
merges with fear of loss—
 loss of sight or hearing after a career
 reliant on senses to detect birds,
 loss of physical flexibility, increase in aches
 and pains, challenges to an active life,
 growing old without children to support us,
 facing the end, at least of what I know.

And yet I dream, that—
all the other transitions were merely
a series of caterpillar instar transformations,
as I grew too large for my skin,
shed and digested my former self,
this next transformation is
the really big one—
as I become the moth of my dreams.

Consider the gorgeous salt-and-pepper patterns
on a typhon sphinx, or a black witch moth.
Maybe my fate, my metamorphosis,
is to become a wise old crone—
what the fearful, the uncomprehending,
call a witch.

IV.

*Under the timeless gaze of Kilimanjaro
a family of elephants traverses the plains;
the matriarch leads her daughters,
their calves (her grandchildren).
All of them stop
when the matriarch stops—
move on when she gives the sign.*

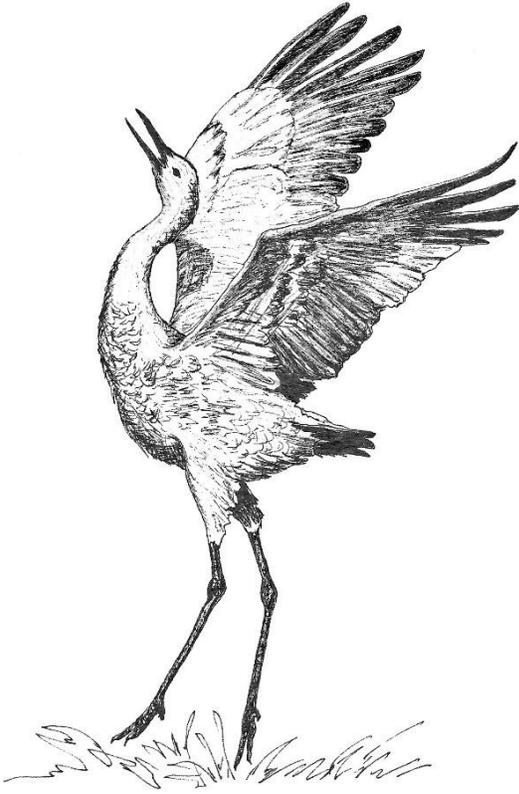


*She is over sixty years old,
the oldest, largest female in the herd.
She has seen all there is to see
in an elephant's world.
In drought, she knows where to find the last water.
She circles her adult children to protect the young
from predators and other dangers.
Without her wisdom, the social bonds
of the family disintegrate—
they are lost.*

I too am lost.
I find myself in a culture that
devalues age,
a culture subservient to hair dye, wrinkle cream,
shapewear, and the appearance of youth.
We improve our lives,
celebrate our individuality, and worship self-reliance;
now our parents fear
being a burden to their children.

Yet iron tradition valued the elders,
bridged generations—
my mother and father treasured pictures,
memories of their grandmothers as vital members
of their extended families,
Mennonite and Amish ancestors built a
dawdy haus on the farm to include aged parents
in family life,
they valued wisdom, life experience, knowledge
to be passed on, closeness to the divine,
connection with the past, our roots.
My birthright has faded into the no-longer-relevant past.

V.



*Every autumn, young birds born in summer
sense the time of change—*

*sandhill cranes, blue-winged teal,
Bullock's orioles, blackpoll warblers,
rufous hummingbirds.*

*Their lives are about to be altered.
The birds don't know where they will go
as they prepare for migration,
yet they—*

*molt new, stronger feathers,
eat healthy, strengthening diets,
put on energy-rich fat,
become restless, flap their wings,
face toward the south,
gather and call to each other or
prepare for solo flight.*

And then—

*they simply fly off
into the unknown.*

So too, humans, sea turtles, velvet ants,
caterpillars, moths, and elephants
face transitions, aging.
None of us know exactly where we are going.
Only humans worry,
fear the unknown.
Our non-human relatives reserve fear
for that moment when the predator
 pounces,
and adrenaline enables escape.
Time may be a predator of youth,
but it requires a different response.

We look toward the future, the unknown,
all the changes, transformations,
rites of passage.
There is a pathway—
 Believe in celebration.
 Embrace birthday parties.
 Coopt the Korean celebration
 of attaining seventy years—*kohCui*,
 “old and rare.”
I intend to be as rare and valuable
as the Hope diamond—
 and more useful!

Some of us may not have children,
but all of us possess knowledge, wisdom.
Let us explore ways to put our experiences
into words in a poem, lines and colors on a canvas,
to share with all who will listen, who will see....

We may not know what we are becoming,
where our metamorphoses are leading,
but like young birds,
we can prepare—
 cultivate health and mind,
 molt into new plumage.
Let's break out those red, high-top tennis shoes,
take inspiration from the velvet ant,
 turn 180 degrees
 and head off in the opposite direction.

[all drawings by Janet Ruth]

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