

# **WHINNY**

**Poems About Nature,  
Human and Otherwise**

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This book is dedicated to Garrison Keillor, who doesn't know about it or know me and who bears no responsibility for any poem here. I dedicate it to him because I appreciate the daily inspiration of his website, *The Writer's Almanac* and also the weekly entertainment of his radio program *The Prairie Home Companion*. Although I have an M.A. in creative writing, once I left the University environment I suffered the fate of many an English major and have been isolated from those who enjoy poetry. So Garrison Keillor, a complete stranger, has been my connection to that world where people love literature even though it's an impractical field of study.

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## A HAMSTER NAMED MAGILICUDDY

runs nowhere on his wheel.  
Escapes his cage when he can.  
Plunges at a mate and humps  
frantically.

Then fights  
until the pair must be  
separated to save their lives.  
Alone, mostly he dozes,  
tolerating human strokes.

I, more civilized, roll into  
yoga poses, jump rope,  
leap on my trampoline,  
ride my exercise bike fast,  
try to achieve more than ever  
before. Before what? I believe  
I'm getting somewhere, am  
thinner.

Feeling slim and sexy,  
I aggressively tease my lover,  
who leans heavily over me  
to see the baseball game better.  
He falls asleep. We quarrel.  
He goes home.

My cat rubs  
her muzzle against my cheek.  
I sneeze but need the touch.

## A WASTED PLACE

On what some would call vacant  
land, my German shepherd used to chase  
woodchucks and incautious young rabbits.  
A trespasser, I gathered crabapple  
blossoms in spring and red velvet  
staghorn sumac berries in fall.  
I saw the rare little white or whorled  
milkweed progress to feathered seed.  
Each in their seasons came  
trillium, Solomon's seal, spiderwort,  
evening lychnis, bladder campion,  
phlox and primrose and chicory,  
multitudes of others, and above  
them red-winged blackbirds trilled  
over cherries and mulberries.  
Summer grasses bloomed high as  
my eyes alongside fragrant  
white and yellow sweet clover,  
migrants brought to America by other  
migrants to make hay meadows.  
Far above hawks float and crows flap.

When night again came early and  
goldfinches actively gathered thistle seeds,  
when migrating robins and flickers  
thickened the air over glowing  
masses of goldenrod and boneset,  
the land's owners began to make  
what they named "improvements."  
They hired newer migrants, who  
worked cheap, keeping secrets as  
they mowed and hacked the land  
to flat shreds and splinters, then  
left their plastic trash and beer cans.  
On the prairie soil, said to be Earth's  
most fertile, they followed orders,  
planting car dealerships and used  
car lots, advertised by flags.  
My meadow and woods had been useless,  
an anomaly in need of development and  
a cash crop of steel and glass.  
Americans say waste is a shame.

## AFTER AN ABSENCE, HANDS

short circuit, blow fuses  
when our loosely wired  
fingers cling. Once  
the electricity is humming,  
we must switch on everything,  
quickly get what we can  
before the flickering  
to brownout, followed  
by blackout and silence.  
The biggest bill will be run up  
after the current is cut.

## AFTER DRAGGING OURSELVES,

overclothed but still frozen,  
through slowmotion sub-zero weeks,  
the tease of warm breezes  
makes a muddy gray, turd-  
uncovering January day seem perfect,  
spring previewed. Children throw  
suddenly unbearable thick  
coats, mittens, hats anywhere  
and run unencumbered. Lovers  
stroll, dare to hold bared hands,  
ignore the damp chill rising  
behind the surprising mildness.

Then it's back to grim winter after  
this happy lapse into the fifties  
(temperatures this time, thank God,  
and not that sentimentalized decade),  
a dark day with snowclouds overhead.

So what? So this: no matter that  
it's a cliché to say that midwestern  
weather's changeable; the variety  
excites, makes polite conversation  
possible, wakes us to face the latest  
variation on a theme of extremes.  
In Chicago we layer on and take off,  
high on surprise though we know  
that all that's constant here  
is contrast. Except in politics,  
where we are consistently windy.

## AFTER RAKING EIGHT BAGSFUL

In infrared images,  
the kind computers can paint,  
raked leaves would shine  
like lightbulbs inside  
clear plastic yard bags.

The eight bagsful I raked  
for my mother sat sedately  
close to the curb, no  
yellow glowing there, no  
hints of electricity  
within, eight dark vinyl turds,  
and no great artist eager to  
paint their heat portraits.

My own yard remains unraked.  
One storm will end autumn's glory,  
and leaf cremation taints the air, but  
today no breeze aids the lazy drift of  
flame-colored maple leaves over ash  
paddles and honey locust leaflets,  
yesterday's wind-blown gold. Pin  
oaks and copper Norway maples  
still fire the sky, trying to hold back  
their climax and the sadness afterwards.  
I'm going to leave it all be, only  
gathering enough sidewalk sycamore  
to eat my fill from their painterly plates.

AFTER WATCHING "ETOSHA, A DRY SEASON"

(an early National Geographic television special, made when such specials were something new, before familiarity had made them less astonishing)

The lions won't leave  
my living room, lie  
languid near the  
African violets. To  
get away, I take my  
dog Jai for a walk,  
but the ballfield fades  
to veldt and the dog's legs  
lengthen stiffly until  
she pronks like a springbok,  
an angular version of  
the bouncing ball she's after.

Canine again, Jai scratches in grass  
still green as the great bullfrogs  
in Etosha, whose icy slitted eyes,  
ochre as cold, dry winter grass,  
blinked in what seemed to be orgasms.  
Then, in a changed camera angle,  
eggs had squirted across my screen  
from a mother frog's bloated cloaca.  
Shots later, black tadpoles had  
swarmed in thick wriggling rivers.

The frogs follow us back home,  
making me and Jai jumpy,  
and I am not sorry to remember  
how a lion cub crunched one and  
an electric blue bush snake had  
swallowed several until his swollen  
belly had dragged, ungainly.  
Before today's film I had rather  
fancied frogs, thought them not as ugly  
acting as some princes, innocently  
singing RIB-BIT or singing  
"It's not easy being green."

But it's all over now,  
my love affair with frogs,  
since the camera caught them  
cannibalizing in the lean dry season,

## AFTER WATCHING ETOSHA (continued)

a narrator stating flatly that  
some frogs know no other  
food than their brothers.  
Say it's not so, Kermit!  
When I sleep, my dreams will  
seethe with these greedy frogs,  
stuffing their mouths with each other,  
amoral as mantises, not what I  
expected of animals with backbones.

## ALWAYS GOOD TO GET HOME

Cicada-killer wasps can't  
carry their fat prey  
very well while they  
fly. Trying, they decline  
to the ground and recomb,  
looking for landmarks and  
dragging supper up some  
trunk to jump once more.  
Again failing to soar, they  
land badly and must again  
crawl up and fall down,  
over and over until  
the repetition hits home  
and they can drop their prey  
packages and flop, weary  
shoppers who over-spent.

## AN UNEASY CALM BEFORE COLOR

Some days in late winter  
when old layered snow is porous  
and black in DuPage County,  
or gradations of gray in Kane,

and the dirty land seems  
an ashtray left unemptied  
by some chain-smoking slattern,  
a sly white blanket still

lying on the treacherous Fox  
makes a bright tempting spread  
over its river bed, where rocks  
shift. Churning currents conceal

the fact that one fine sunshiny day  
the river will boil up and crack  
its cover into jagged chunks,  
which it will suck like hard candy

into its hungry swollen flow.  
And it will eat up land, spread  
beyond its bed and seep, stealing  
more than it can ever keep.

Already the Fox has an appetite.  
Like the mammal who gave it name,  
its stomach can rumble, insatiable  
after a bitter winter's deprivations.

Yet these days the river seems safe.  
Mallards punctuate its surface.  
Mammal tracks make crazy dotted lines  
the thaw will not bother to cut on.

Its shorelines are indecisive.  
Where no bridges give definition  
and no liquid gurgle can be heard,  
it masquerades as floodplain.

But it is too smooth a liar.  
Plains are pricklier; their prairies  
wave, even on quiet iced days,  
tough grasses, herbs, and young shrubs.



AN UNEASY CALM BEFORE COLOR (continued)

Slick as varnish, thin and easy  
to tear as a sheet of cellophane,  
the Fox's snow-coated ice highlights  
our climate's cold March monochrome.

AND THEIR EGGS TAKE TWO HOURS TO BOIL

What I like best about the ostrich  
is that if I'm ever in its African habitat,  
I might find it without binoculars  
and not miss it while I fix  
the focus, as happens here with  
shorebirds, hawks, and those difficult

perchers I crave to catch in my lens.  
But a herd of 600 tall ostriches  
with stem necks undulating in  
unison and feathered black lashes  
batting over eyes twice the weight  
of their brains, *that* even I might

sight. And be sad that we've man-  
handled them badly, slit lifted  
throats in case their gizzards hid  
diamonds, made plumed hats of their  
coats, had dinner and bowl both from  
their heavyweight eggs, and still take

for agriculture the plains where they  
flapped in frenzied mating dance,  
ran jackals off their hatchlings,  
and left the land as wildly green and  
grand as when their strange reptilian  
race of mammal-acting grounded avians

began, back when man was afloat in  
the chromosome future of a primate  
capable of becoming avaricious.

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