

old dri's lament

dri (Tibetan): a female yak

ALSO BY GAIL SHER

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Gail Sher



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For Brendan

To Jaime de Angulo

*One of the most outstanding writers
I have ever encountered*

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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month of the groundhog

old dri's lament

without a head I am
I am the throat

without a song I am
I am the song

I am the song without a head
I live between two mountains

you croak young frog
as I dig for eatable roots
you croak young frog
as I dig up hairy rotten ones

cage of ribs
carcass ablaze
sky full of frogs
I suck your bones

hawk o hawk questing the remuda

on a sway
the bird will give
I am a bird

you neigh you shrill
toss your head
I am the mare you smell

in the fog
in the pasture
I am your bowed neck

when the north wind
rushes over the moor
I am your mane flying

I a pigeon strut along the wharf

by pails of fresh fish I stroll
looking like an old babushka at market

through stalls I wend as evening glows
waltz as the band warms to its ragtime

a very large man hands me a cup of milk

parrot whom I hate

red sun bird
I saw you gaze
at noon's fierce fire

red sun bird
it is mine
you take from it
and I suffer

eagles, vultures
eat out your hearts
like the Buddhas tigers tore with their teeth

o bird of peregrine hips

I am a face
beneath the hills
I dig for roots
throw them in my pack

a face I am
all wrinkles and bent
propped with a stick

I come out o' the hills
pass a bit of town
buy some grub
from a half-wit

o child of stone axe
before-the-white-man boy

I am a bead
I am a head
button of glass
on string

in a row
are my sisters
loud and colorful

rise up girls
make a teepee
make a pouch
stare at the sun
streaming in the door
and toward the hills
out in the distance

hey, the man

broad, squat and
dark, very dark

a big man

clear sky blue
big sky and big clear street

sagebrush
jackrabbits
juniper gnarled, rough

but the valley spreads wide
hey mountain, are you there

so I walk into town
high desert
blue sky
juniper wood smoking

I see Indians (Paiutes)
standing along the street
hey I say
but they . . . nothing

it's clear and cool
almost fall
really beautiful weather
so I feel good

shotgun rabbit
I am and
there's another one
hey, grab your gun

the sagebrush is tall
I am a tall bird
hunting rabbit
with my pea-cock

I make circles in the dirt
attack sharply

rabbit fat is warming
rabbit skin is warming
rabbit flesh is warming

stupa of mind's darkness

I am a field
a fast-flowing river
back and forth I walk
where two paths spread

I choose the right one
but a huge man blocks me
go away huge man

glimmering in the distance
are butter lamps
are giant people
one, two, three heads

I eat sun
I lay in grass
a lizard scurries in the heat

lexicon of stallions
with the gift of foot
we stole you back

a trident through my heel
emerges through my head

the word
in my wrist
rears from the pyre

my memory of that
one spring

giving & taking

my greed is an owl
I chase it away
with my breath it carries
happiness

the problems of others
lands on my selfishness
which sinks to the earth
I am pliable and soft

rain on the redwoods
drip drip drip
blue jays' caw-for-the-morning subdued
wood-rats vanish
squirrels stay in their holes
drip drip drip

winter rain and the trees just stand there
and the grass
shivering at the window
aren't you cold trees?
crows, aren't you freezing?

poker still
startled (you seem)
on the path
by the baby maple

skin soft
crevices shallow
in a swirl of air
belly pumping fast

till my slow breath
fuses with your heart

nip nip from my loins

a hornets' nest
a great big hornets' nest
all the hornets streaming in and out

I watch
pretty soon I throw rocks
come out hornets
fly after me, bite me

sky burial

o wall of skulls
vast wall of skulls
wash this body
shave its head
seat it shrouded in white cloth

month of the squirrel

nagaland

under blue air
I fell into the river

under blue air
I heard the winter crane

when the *p'hurba* seared her hand
I pulled it from the boulder

then Buddha became a mountain

*licking jiaka in the dawn, licking jiaka in the dawn,
on a warm spring day of blooming flowers*

in a mountain by the sea
a rivulet runs
a baby frog croaks

then freezes
(I am not near)
in sun its green skin jumps

curious, I approach
still still, primordially quiet

I wake, immediately clear
about something

caves of increasing goodness

when it rains
a beautiful fringe of water drips across my roof
when it rains
stones shift
crushing monks to death

o dragon from the sea
judge not my murderer
for the jonquils are out
swallow him with the sky

o woman bird
you wag your tail

treading the cement
the gray bird
frantic

in the heat of day
(stunned)
young thing

a gull drops . . . lifts . . .
(something is in its beak)

red flags red flags fluttering red flags

of the thirteen holy mountains
at the Yellow River's source
Anyemaqen, the god
watches over the Hundred Lakes

moon gates, decorated eaves,
little bridges over flowing water
temples on hills overlooking the water
overlooking the Yangtze-delta's greens

on your departure

five tea-boiled eggs
two pieces of sesame cake
pumpkin seeds
sweet-sour turnip slivers
a flask of tea
inside a shoulder bag of Suzhou silk

*still-good butter no longer fresh but inexpensive and
not dirty*

old *ma-pa*, you made our family rich
old *ma-pa*, we don't care what you did before
you came

the lama kindly sent you
to my maternal grandmother

because you are smart
our family has prospered
and made a name for itself in our locality

old *ma-pa*, you made our family rich
old *ma-pa*, we don't care what you did before
you came

dead grass on the hill
yellow hill
floppy with faded grasses

I look out and see you
all slumped over

dead grass on the hill
once green in the rain
tall and thick with dandelions and flowers
resilient
even lyrical

where is your song
what happened to your melody

“give me that hoe”
said the boy to his sister
who only cared about her rabbit

since he didn’t
she pretended not to hear

“I have long ears” she sang
in the squeaky voice of an animal

“pass me the hoe!
how many times do I have to ask”

wind-washed on the high plateau

mountain snow
deeper than a tall man
mountain snow
I cannot walk

inside I walk
make quick headway to the village
swallow steamy noodles flecked with meat

mutant me
me less-than-half
o snow
can't you see I'm desperate

turnsol of the badlands

black of dawn
queen queen of the black essence
whisper to me

I wander at night
through the holy-mesa's thorns

there a demoness
spirit untamed . . .
an old man begins
speaking of a strange experience

piles of corpses
handsome, fragrant, sleek
fill me, dancing
at the bottom of tall mountains

a boulder fell from the sky
a boulder fell from the sky
no one around . . . nothing up the cliff
don't go near the cliff, warned a woodcutter
for a leopard, having birthed a litter,
Is keeping them there

I walk near the cliff
I run near the cliff
the leopard with her kittens
the leopard with her kittens
just as the woodsman had said

I saw a man
I saw a man
behind the village, along the stream
that ran through a dense patch of trees

I saw a man
thin as a stick
sketched out of charcoal

I saw a man
thin as a stick
with a huge stomach,
a cow's stomach

I called to my friend
to come see the man
but there was no man

I toss you my wife
o lappet-faced bird

o whitebird whitebird, white stork with red legs

when in the mountain
snow is deep
to the valley you come
with your white-white wings

eat-up
eat-up fast

the canyadas turn black

I am a head rolling in the grass
laughing at my brother sun
(who thinks he is the sun)

I am a foot running by the sea
squinting at a gull
(who has caught its mirror reflection)

I am a stomach wounded by a spear
crying for the whale
(snorting just below the surface)

the moon is red
I am whittling something
leaning against a tree
smelling death up close

*I, Phug-shag, warrior god of Tema-mo's retinue,
am pleased that you are using my mountain for study*

above green fields of *janma* trees
dead leaves blow
north wind sweeps

about green fields of *janma* trees
dead leaves blow
north wind sweeps
a million sickle leaves

at my crazy behest

and he fires the valley
with a great roar and loud (loud) explosions
and the valley, clogged with smoke,
allows nothing but hiding my eyes

suddenly it dies
though the god is offended
(he does not like anyone cutting green branches
and is even offended if locals cut dry wood)

*crows cawed, crows barked
loudly (loudly) all day long,
say friends say friends from far away
to appease the god
we made a black tea offering*

next morning at Tsirab's temple
I say I am sorry, ask forgiveness, and
make a black tea offering

Tsirab is not angry
in fact he is quite pleased
Tsirab is definitely on your side
he is not upset at all

fog
and that deep-throated horn
bellowing from your folds

from the ocean floor
where sea-cows moan

sour earth
stagnant like a woman
sloppy and wet

you are drugged
on brittle haunches you squat
no elasticity left

*O Goddess Protectress Who Holds the White Umbrella
Please Accept this Tea and Smoke from Branches of
Evergreen*

*follow me, follow me, said
a naked black woman
riding saddleless on a big black mule*

that was Palden Lhamo
the Glorious Goddess, the protectress of Drepung
it means you will be entering Drepung said Aku-me
who himself had learned the *dharma* there

a tall, handsome man
in a white Tibetan *chuba*
pointed out a path
go in that direction he said

that was Nechung, the protector of Drepung
he was pointing to the south
where Lhasa rises from Choo-chur

floppy hooves among the savin

in an iron fence with iron thorns
encaged said the seer

trapped inside the hollow of a
stone-animal's horn

I see a strong black man
with many eyes on his arms
entering the fence
bringing something out

I saw him in the dew, through a crack in the dawn

sit down for a while
said one with long intestines
nobody could rush him

he saw, he says,
and you can see it in his eye,
Tanpai Gyaltsan give
Dawa Drolma the reliquary

when you come to die
take my mind
I have breathed from it
all suffering

I skip by
on my way places
no one knows of our love

caves of increasing goodness

when it rains
a beautiful fringe of water drips across my roof
when it rains
stones shift
crushing monks to death

o dragon from the sea
judge not my murderer
for the jonquils are out
swallow him with the sky

month of the wild turnips

little fly
in your buzz, stillness rings
I love stillness
in my still home
little fly

for a second you were nervous
(I saw it in your wings)
you landed on my napkin
turned clockwise

but after turning clockwise
you walked around for a while

sky of fall o sky of fall
leaves wind-brushed, debris everywhere
here, taste a bit of the summer
I live on

fly of snow
black fly, big fly
your time is passed
no one can help you

go back to your hole gopher
do not destroy what the ants have built
your hill is useless
no one will bother you

o fox, your breath
no purr no
silent bravado

in grassy fog
the old mare stands
skinny tail limp

pork and grain
pork and grain
open their mouths
push it in
push it in hard

of nilotic waist
o tigress of the east
figment of the rapids' nestling backwater

looking toward the hills

hummingbird hummingbird treading spring air
your red flower will die
in its wake, hard dry earth
o hummingbird what will you do

flickering wings
each forms a V
a gathering circling of flickering V's
flip flop flip

a bank of birds
flocks of black
o black wall of winter
howling wind of winter

gulls ride sand
strut like kings
beyond the purple crocus

tonight the owl
through rain I hear your purr
low-slung, ancient

having circled the flames
of the *vidyadhara's* pyre
old crow, what is in your heart
as you rest at the plain's bottom

above the water
neither burning nor drying the water
one red hawk
closes its eyes
as it sinks below
the water's sound

o buzzard in the sky
invoked the girl
riding pillion

cold grass in the storm

tall blades
flogged by the storm

ever open
your jaw swings low
o orchid-on-a-stem
where is your throat

pot of pebbles
zinnias and pebbles
burning in the sun
dissolving into light

damsel tree
for a second
the junco . . .

elephant man
invisible
enormous in your skull

I break

I break in sheer canyon

coyotes yapping (howling)

in hindsight a giant
skin irreconcilable

hair-split sky
I rub up to the shadow

thin girl
in a shawl kneeling
holding a match to the wood

horseback opera

no talking, no singing
just patterns made
as lamas ride

I am a head
when my mother gave birth
my eyes like *dzi*
aroused her eyre
which she devoured

this mother is not safe
she thinks only of herself
she will eat you
in the night she will ravage you

moulting his form
at wood's edge buried in leaves
am I
am my mother
mother, please don't flee

gentle arab
among your beans
hair dyed pink

in three years I'll be dead, he said

purple air dressed the trees
the night being snowless

live well
we also will live

through the brush
the blind old man
poking at things with his stick

wild o too wild
from the juice of him
from the sudden swing of his caracole

old leopard-beggar, go away
the bounty money you want
(though your pelt was stolen)
go away old leopard-beggar

sea-shell clan
among the ghosts
with your grit
paint the wall white

I thought I was myself
but I am only a throat
please come in I sigh

old lady & bird

is a canary that?
no, it is her heart
awake

galactic world sharp as a crucifix

blue-black tree
wet from night
the stars hold still
and I, too, listen intently

fog lurks
tree tips through billows of gray
a young breath
parched but open
sits inside your glory pool

let water be a sob

sea-shells sing
sea-shells sing my tears
at the lonely shore
at the vast grinning ocean

hot day in winter
winter which is late
winter, why are you late

month of the deer running

o Raven, my poison, COME
Bull-snake, my poison, COME
Crablouse, my poison, COME

Jim Lizard, he sit on a rock all day
pretty clever but not serious
a damn liar

luck

a man needs
(must find)
or he'll just be common

maybe a wolf
maybe a bird

HA! yells the guesser
she'd laugh, shows the bones,
throws them in the air
sways side to side

where's so-'n-so

parked over there by that juniper

I get up
spit

behind the flame
the camp is quiet
a few babies cry

*why, you ask why
well, I go to woods
(I'm a young girl)
look for berries
but my poison find me
he scare me*

*I don't look for him
HE FIND ME!*

tin lizzie is fixed
but we stay
in the sagebrush
spitting brown juice
from one of the car's foot-boards

nowhere
is trees
emaculate green
and lush (full of leaves)

everyone knows
everyone sees it
like his own skin

no road
just bush
a clump, a ditch
six eight tin lizzies
clunckity-clunk
rattling through

a campfire starts
then another
she's weaving a basket of willow twigs

you bring firewood
I cook, all right

within words its quantity long short

the fire soars
we're lying around
come on, SING
the poisons don't hear

a woman says
you did pretty good
you help
that's good

a man says
he ask Raven
is he going to die
Raven says I don't know
ask the others

sick man
in a funk
listens
in his belly

upper land I am
it is dark and
my wolf-bitch sways

it's dusk (I hear some shots)

*my poison don't hear
mountain lion, wolf,
too far away, don't hear*

how you steal a dog

I dunno

how you steal a poison
(some shamans do)

sure I do!
they steal mine too
if they can

*I'm pretty sick
maybe I die
I doctor myself
you stay
help sing*

*maybe I die
I dunno
my shadow's on the road
can't find me no more*

*ohh . . . it hurt
inside right here*

*everybody die
I ask my poison tonight*

*sometime my poison
very far away, not hear
many sing, he hear better*

I catch a new *damaagome*
he's wild
I'm training him
follows me like a dog

here you come
yellin' your head off
damn it
you scare him away

the sick woman's
on the ground
under a blanket
on a bed of tules

I sing
I suck
put my lips to her body
and pull HARD

pass me that lard can

next day
the sick woman
she toss me some beads
it's not much she says

it's okay
I throw them to my *niini*

jackrabbits hares hundreds HUNDREDS pop pop pop

so he goes into the bush
has a louse
for one of his poisons
gets his louse to call hers

pretty soon a woman
gets up from her campfire
(she doesn't know why)
wanders toward the bush

right where the old man waits

I sing into the horn
my voice in the horn

ha! my father is calling me
I'd better go find him

my *damaagome*
he look for the horn

it's night
we're stumbling down
a steep trail
darn steep country

I am
slow gossip

slow but erect
dark-chocolate skin
a few long white whiskers

*them people you don't see
coyotes, fox, dinihowis, damaagomes
they don't know me
they might hurt me
I'm say'n look
I'm a friend
I'm feedin' you
I don't mean you no harm*

it's dusk
he chews
spits in the four directions

about the mortar near my hearth

*you shouldn't do that
he's getting' too hot
too near the fire
make him mad
bring bad luck
make you sick
make your children sick*

old dri's lament

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