

About a Poem

Caroline Adderson on Richard Outram's "Mogul's Eye"

MOGUL'S EYE

*Did not survive fire and water, nor earth, nor air;
not the cumbrous elements. Nor did it become
quintessence, numberless as thou seest. No.
It is closed, clothed in darkness for all time.*

*Mogul's eye was the still centre, the sometime
calm in the loomed elephant rage to be.
Wherein it mirrored the creature sun.*

*Mogul's eye had looked on eternal light
grooming the endless orient riverine grasslands;
piercing the overlapped canopy of the felled forest;
burning stark verticals in high mountain passes;
knifing through chinks in the slats of a boxcar,
holding the motes mingled in shafts of gold;
tangling snarls in the steel mesh of enclosures;
rebounding blaze from a bucket of living water;
quenched forever at last in Penobscot Bay.*

*Mogul, alone among other beasts,
in common with man, could weep,
and did, real tears from his small eye.
In common with man, not without cause.
He drowned in salt water.*

*Being not man nor angel but beast, Mogul
saw not through his eye by with it life
in the myriad present: which is immortal.*

*And he beheld, as he was beholden to,
what he became: his one death.*

THIS IS THE FINAL POEM in Richard Outram's 1993 book, *Mogul Recollected*. Taken on its own, it cannot convey the cumulative power of the collection, which concerns a true event, the 1836 sinking of a ship in Penobscot Bay. *The Royal Tar* was transporting a circus when, during a storm, the mishandled boiler caught fire. Terrified by the waves, but also the flames, Mogul the elephant refused to jump into the ocean. Instead he placed his forelegs on the deck railing, which then collapsed under his weight causing him to plunge onto a full life raft. All, including the elephant, drowned.

The poems look at the tragedy, which would otherwise be lost to history, from every possible angle, and here, in the final poem, the reader, already forced to contemplate not only the significance of death by fire and water of a fellow creature, but also its terrible treatment in life, now must look Mogul directly in the eye and ask the age-old question: why must we suffer? The question is, of course, as unanswerable as the darkness of the death we are "beholden" to is inevitable. (Death and the ability to suffer are two more things we have in common with elephants beyond the ability to cry.) Yet Mogul's brave eye, "the still centre," ever sought out the light, which in turn ever diminished as he moved from freedom to captivity, until it was just the "rebounding blaze" from the burning ship reflected in the water bucket of slavery. Still he saw it, "eternal" light. He saw *with* that light-seeking eye, instead of *through* it.

In none of the four or five times that I've read *Mogul Recollected*, have I been able to get through it without sobbing for an elephant who perished more than a century and a half ago. The poems are a call to compassion, which literally means "to suffer together." We suffer with the animals (though somewhat less so than they, I would venture), yet it is they who teach us how we might finally reach immortality. With their particular wisdom—instinct, intuition, creature insight—they perceive "life in the myriad present," which goes on and on, recorded or not. ♦

Poem from Mogul Recollected, by Richard Outram. Published by Porcupine's Quill.

