

Report on Human Beings

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You know about desks and noses,
proteins, mortgages, orchestras,
nationalities, contraceptives;
you have our ruins and records,
but they won't tell you
what we were like.

We were distinguished
by our interest in scenery;
we could look at things for hours
without using or breaking them—
and there was a touch of desperation, not to be found
in any other animal,
in the looks of love we directed
at our children.

We were treacherous of course.
Like anything here—
winds, dogs, the sun—
we could turn against you unexpectedly,
we could let you down.
But what was remarkable about us
and which you will not believe
is that we alone,
with the exception of a few pets
who probably learned it from us,
when betrayed
were frequently surprised.

We were one of a million species
who continually cried out
or silently wept with pain.
I am proud that we alone resented
taking part in the chorus.

Yes, some of us
liked to cause pain.
Yes, most of us
sometimes
liked to cause pain,
but I am proud that most of us
were ashamed
afterward.

Our love of poetry would have amused you;
we were so proud of language
we thought we invented it
(and thus failed to notice
the speech of animals,
the birds' repeated warnings,
the whispered intelligence
of mutant cells).

We did invent boredom,
a fruitful state.
It hid the size of our desires.
We were spared many murders,
many religions
because we could say, "I am bored."
A kind of clarity
came when we said it
and we could go to Paris or the movies,
give useful parties, master languages,
rather than sink our teeth in our lover's throat
and shake till things felt right again.

Out of the same pulsing world
you know,
out of gases, whorls,

fronds, feelers, jellies,
we devised hard edges,
strings of infinite tension stretched
to guide us.

The mind's pure snowflake
was our map.

Lines, angles, outlines
not to be found in rocks or seas
or living matter
or in the holes of space,
how strange these shapes must look to you,
at odds with everything,
uncanny, broken from the flow,
I think they must be for you
what we called art.

What was most wonderful about us
was our kindness,
but of this it is impossible to speak
Only someone who knows our cruelty,
who knows the fears we always lived with,
fear of inside and outside, smooth and rough,
soft and hard, wet and dry, touch and no touch,
only someone who understands the great palace we built
on the axis of time
out of our fear and cruelty and called history,
only those who have lived in the anger
of a great modern city,
who saw the traffic in the morning
and the police at night
can know how heartbreaking
our kindness was.

Let me put it this way.
One of us said, "I think
our life is not as good
as the mind warrants,"
another, "It is hard

to be alone and alive at the same time."
To understand these statements
you would have to be human.

Our destruction as a species
was accidental.

Characteristically
we blamed it on ourselves,
which neither the eagle
nor the dinosaur would do.

Look closely around you,
study your instruments,
scan the night sky.

We were alien.
Nothing in the universe
resembles us.

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