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# The Muse and the Poet, The Naturalist at Large on the Delaware River, An Acquaintance in the Heavens, I Think Continually of Those Who Went Truly Ape, Free Fall

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# Five Poems

ANNIE DILLARD

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## The Muse and the Poet

—from Francis Buckland, *Buckland's Curiosities of Natural History*, 1858, 1860, 1865

### Stuffed Mermaid

In an old curiosity-shop, in the west arcade  
of Hungerford Market (where they sell poultry),  
I found my lady, looking as pretty as ever,

under her glass case. Her head is too  
bullet-shaped, her eyes decidedly glass  
doll's eyes, her teeth a small bit of bone

cut into notches, which detract from her interesting look;  
but to make up for this, her hair is longer,  
and her chest, etc, exceedingly well developed.

She is fastened upright by means of the curved  
portion of her tail, and smiles gracefully  
through her dusty glass house.

### Pet Ape

I had at one time a very large fine ape.  
Not wishing to lose sight of him altogether,  
I made his skin into a mat for the table.

## Nightingale

I no longer disbelieve the story of a man  
being specially retained by the proprietors of Vauxhall  
to sit in a bush and sing like a nightingale. "Hear 'em,

sir, why you're sure to hear 'em. We keeps  
a nightingale." "Water-wabble-wabble—swatee."

## Envoi

But why remain here in the shallow water, my pretties?  
Thousands and hundreds of thousands of your babies I have reared.

## The Naturalist at Large on the Delaware River

—from Charles C. Abbott, M.D., *Waste-land Wanderings*, 1887

### Confessions

I once witnessed a riot in wrendom.  
I have insisted that the cardinal-redbird  
is not a mocker. I take it all back.

I am free to confess that woodpeckers  
have failed to interest me.  
I know of two fine boulders in the meadows,

but I use them only for stepping-stones—  
never as texts. My last public talk  
about them was disastrous.

I saw a purple grackle's nest.  
I resolved to climb the tree.  
The birds looked on approvingly.

It now remained for me to descend.  
Through some strange miscalculation  
I failed to secure a footing, and fell.

The scars on my back made an excellent  
map of the Micronesian archipelago.  
It most vividly recalled

the apparently instant appearance  
of every woman in the village  
when my horse ran away and landed me  
in the duck-pond on the common.

### Another Confession

In numerous little sink-holes,  
I find the skeletons of small fishes.  
I pick them from the mud.

The imprint of their shriveled  
forms is left—fossil  
impressions for the naturalist

of ten thousand years to come.  
This is possible, of course, so  
I wrote on the smooth surface

from which I lifted a minnow,  
*Fundulus multifasciatus*.  
Will it not startle the paleontologist

of the indefinite future to chisel  
from rock an already labelled fossil?  
I trust that he will not go mad.

### Late Wanderings

Now that nesting is over, many  
find next to nothing to sing about.

When a blast from the north blows  
the brown rushes, above the roar  
can be heard a tone of sadness,

a cry, "We weep! we weep!"

"Keep up, keep up, keep!"

"Chesapeake, O Chesapeake!"

Was there not yet something  
that I could watch even  
by the gloaming's uncertain and waning light?

## An Acquaintance in the Heavens

—from Martha Evans Martin and Donald Howard Menzel,  
*The Friendly Stars*, 1907, 1964

A window in my bedroom opens towards  
The northeast. Many times I have suddenly  
Opened my eyes in the night. Betelgeuse  
Pushes its red face up over the horizon.

One begins in February to watch the handle  
Of the Dipper, so clearly pointing to something  
Important just below the horizon.

It has pulled into the view the steady  
Shining face of Arcturus. The hawks  
And crows are among the high trees.

There comes a soft June evening. The blue  
Jays have become stealthy. One walks  
To the end of the porch and looks for Altair.

Orion: We watch for it in October.  
One jewel after another emerges  
From the storehouse below the horizon until

The whole splendid figure is before us.  
We remember then that the juncos  
Came that day and we heard them.

The birds have ceased to sing and are seeking  
shadows. Fomalhaut the lonely:  
When the days are growing shorter, some evening,

Just after dark, one sees it, trailing  
Over the small arc of its circle  
With no companion near it, and no need.

## I Think Continually of Those Who Went Truly Ape

—from *The Mysterious Senses of Animals*, Droscher

During the hours of darkness all baboons  
suffer from a deep-rooted, primitive anxiety  
which continually startles them into wakefulness.

A deep, soft 'o-o-o.'  
An appealing 'la-la-la' cry.

A soft murmur among the crows, probably  
their love-talk. 'Zick, zick, zick.'

'Attention, please. I have just  
discovered a field  
of flowers. It is buckwheat.'

'Here I stand. Around me is my kingdom.'  
The male golden plover goes completely haywire.

'Ga, ga, ga, ga, ga'  
means: 'we feel comfortable here.'  
Five syllables means 'The meadow grass is poor.'

'Yup, yup, yup.' 'Kyah.' 'Kyoo.'  
A new day is dawning on the plain of Amboseli.

## Free Fall

—from David W. McKay and Bruce G. Smith,  
*Space Science Projects for Young Scientists*, 1986

Try dropping from different heights.

What do you observe? WHICH WAY IS DOWN?

**Be careful selecting a place to perform this project.**

Wear gloves and a plastic apron. Repeat the trial.

Wear earplugs. WEAR A FACE SHIELD AT ALL TIMES.

BE CAREFUL. THESE EXPERIMENTS ARE ADVANCED.

Try dropping from different heights. Imagine  
how limited your knowledge of the world would be  
if this were the only way you could gather information.

For example, what is on the other side  
of those trees? Try dropping from different heights.  
If gravity were absent, what do you think would happen?

Now, drop the leaking can. Now,  
puncture the beach ball. Cut the garden hose.  
Start the stopwatch. Grind up some cotton balls.

Try dropping from different heights. KEEP  
YOUR FIRE EXTINGUISHER HANDY! Look closely.  
Know where you can get help fast. Now try it.