

Notes on “The Ferry Passenger” and “Territorial”
Kathleen Aponick, January 17, 2011

“**The Ferry Passenger**” is a belated address to the departed, written as a response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in New York. It had been shortly after the attack when I learned my cousin Claire’s son Tim was among those killed in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Claire’s family lived in New York and I in Massachusetts and we had only recently been in touch in connection with a family history account printed in 2000. Removed from the immediacy of her family’s pain on September 11, 2001 yet knowing someday I would write a poem about the event I had to wait to find a vehicle that would trigger the emotional center for a poem.

Years went by before I settled on a recurring image I’d seen on television news even before all the towers had fallen, that of river ferries carrying passengers away from Ground Zero, away from the death and destruction. The ferry soon became the poem’s literal vehicle. The passenger-speaker would be fleeing the chaos, unaware of the full consequences of what had happened. Still continuing to feel at a remove I decided to employ memory. The passenger would be thinking back on the events. That meant I risked creating more distance from the raw emotion yet I hoped the speaker’s longing that many years removed from what happened would give the poem its central emotion.

I looked for references that would cast some historical perspective. Many poets today rely on an inner dialogue with symbols of the present or recent past. But symbols and images of ages past show us as part of the human continuum, which for me is quite powerful. So when I learned of the Greek river Achelous and found it had a deity whom people prayed to in times of crisis, it seemed a gift. From this point the poem seemed to write itself. The passenger-survivor, still burdened with guilt, reveals to the departed that had he known of his death, and known of the deity... *we would have suspended disbelief/ flung it into the cold water/ intoned the gods*. The poem’s use of *we* instead of *I* is meant to suggest the passenger sees himself as part of a wider group cut off from the gods. And though his earlier *It is ages since we abandoned the gods* could be a reference to deities of an ancient world what’s clear is he still imagines, in his profound grief, a way he could have saved the departed, even one that involves transforming his own belief system to include the gods.

“Territorial”

One day as I was driving out of the suburban circle where I live I sensed some movement on a lawn. I turned to see what appeared to be a large coyote although it may have been a fox. It was sitting statue still with its head turned upward. It had a scruffy, mottled white fur and didn’t look like any animal I knew. It may have been ill. Despite the noise of the car’s engine as I came to a stop the creature ignored me. I was frightened and wondered what it was waiting for? Why was it there? If the two children that lived in the house beside it came out to play on the lawn what would it do? I returned home to call my neighbor to warn her but by that time the animal was gone.

This was a time I was researching 17th century witchcraft hysteria in the town for a short play I was writing. Among the many causes of the hysteria were pressures brought on by Indian wars, smallpox, and land disputes that led some neighbors to accuse others of witchcraft to explain illnesses and deaths. But the forested world also added to the general climate of fear with wolves being a special menace as they attacked sheep and other domestic animals.

Now, 300 years later, our sprawling neighborhood continues to threaten the wild animals' habitat. Fox, pheasant, deer, and others, usually hidden, often come to feeders or back porches. Occasionally pets and, though rarely, small children are injured. Writing about the encounter I found the speaker's fear linking itself to that of the colonist's. I realize by its word choice and tone the poem is a warning that could suggest potential rebellion on the part of any threatened group, animal or human.