

BLACK MADONNA, CASA ALAMOSAS SHRINE

Living and speaking water is within me,
saying deep inside me, Home to the Father

Origen, 6th Century C.E.

That's me and the newts
of the world down there

lifting our heads to drink
as a girl on a stool

working
with dogs laid round her feet

sits and stares at an empty page
and dreams eels

And all the world's amphibians
sip her one syllable words

God Is Not
God Is Not

God Is Not
A Boy's Name

which we already knew
but still

the eels slide off the page
they sing to the dry river bed

Yes the eels pour down from the page
writhe on the desert floor

where the world is dogs
at mid-day rest

a serious girl on a stool
Serious spectacled girl

playing Artemis
playing Crow

we'll lick the salt from your feet
until we learn the rules

Rules are simple enough
she says

Rules Are Flowers
Rules Are Song

Simple enough to forget
she says

which is how we get them wrong
but the world is three old dogs at rest

a quiet girl on a stool
and us

in the salt-lick carmine glow
of her slow amphibian song

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During the years that Meinrad Craighead lived as a nun at Stanbrook Abbey she developed a slow, trance-like process of sanding into scraperboard to conjure images fed by her wide-ranging studies of mythology and religion. In the years that followed her departure from Stanbrook this work took on greater clarity, its imagery now openly focussed on her lifelong intimation of God the Mother. The painting *Wolfmilk Nursing*, which comes from this period, concerns a vision of a lactating female wolf that Craighead encountered during work with a shaman in New Mexico, both of whom – shaman and wolf - became important mentors to her during this period of her life.

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CROW MOTHER, HER EYES, HER EGGS

and what breeds inside them
slippery threads of thought
writhing wet little psalms
back to open ground

Crow Mother's face

a flat triangular hole
question I never could solve
still groping for kindness
in that geometric gaze

Crow Mother's knees

which I'd missed altogether
up-thrust cradle of bone
her clutch of warm eggs
fattening within

Crow Mother's fingers

slow at their work
open the lips of the dead
who soften under her touch
neither restless nor afraid

*

Among the many animal psychopomps frequenting both Craighead's dreams and her imagery – woodpecker, turtle, wolf, crow, badger – her closest spiritual guides have been her own beloved dogs, pictured in *O Fountain Mouth*. The upwelling water that first came to Craighead as a child, bringing her into the feminine presence of the sacred, is another recurrent motif in her work - as in this painting, whose title evokes the Marian litanies of her Catholic childhood. This 'living

water' has also found an outward echo and embodiment in the great rivers – Danube, Arno, Rio Grande - towards which she's consistently gravitated.

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*O FOUNTAIN MOUTH
purify us, we beseech thee*

Let's start with the dogs.
Languid friends, they'll wait all day
while Meinrad curls into her work.

Or maybe the blanket
shrouding her head, how it swallows
the long afternoon.

It smells of milk in there.
Milk, rough Navaho wool.
The scrape of Meinrad's pen

the only sound
except for the dogs, their breathing.
It could pull you to sleep

if you listened
but sleep's been disallowed
for these dogs are no longer alone

and over their lifted heads
a river now falls without pause -
white milk, and black,

which as before
cannot be held back.
You feel her old throat open

feel its song spill into the light
until the hot thought of your heart
is written on the air.

Meinrad's arm knows what to do
as that shoulder bends to the page,
caved with her two bare feet

from the heat of the Rio Grande day,
with her three hounds waiting
as they'll always wait

when Meinrad's eyes are closed,
her milk coming again, the smell
as it runs off her tongue

pouring, pouring out
onto the listening world.

*

Having travelled far from the confines of monastic life, Craighead has nonetheless retained a strong sense of fidelity to her Benedictine vows of obedience to spirit, as they've led her ever-deeper into the 'animal mysteries'. In her numerous late images of female Christian mystics, Craighead understands herself visited by the spirit of her subject, only undertaking these portraits in response to such visitations. As well as evoking the ever-present figure of Crow Mother, the two corvids in *Woman with Ravens* echo the legend of St Meinrad, Craighead's spiritual ancestor and (male) namesake.

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SISTER MEINRAD

Sister, swallowed in black, listen.
There's a man I need to kill.

Turn, Sister, and listen
as you squat to spray your prayer

over the dirt.

This man will never stop,
he flails against night
where everything dies.

Sister, tunneling ahead,
heaving earth with restless claws,
turn back before you go,

lead me to his twisted root
so we can chew the fibres
that hold him fast.

Listen - I call on your yellowed
teeth, the stink of your breath
in this crumbling room.

Come, furtive digger,
breathe on my face
so I know you're there.

Come, lumbering Sister,
help me to kill what will not die.

These four poems are from a series, *O Fountain Mouth*, responding to the work of the American artist, writer and Benedictine nun Meinrad Craighead, whose life has been steered, since early childhood, by an intimate sense of encounter with God the Mother. Apart from *Sister Meinrad*, all of the poems here are ekphrastic, replying to paintings of the same name by Craighead.

The three prose passages are from an essay published in Issue 13 of *The Dark Mountain Journal*, April 2018: *Meinrad Craighead and the Animal Face of God*.