

Comfort and Mercy

for John Coakley

Hospital ships, March 30, 2020

Now we have naming of ships.
As I sit grading the lovely girls'
thoughts on that clown Aristophanes

as John sits recording a lecture
for the students who will listen later
in bedrooms and kitchens,

I hear him say *they would be pardoned*
I hear him say *Lincoln appoints Grant*
My students say *these old wasps show*

this democracy is not what it seems
I hear him say *they would be pardoned*
and into the Port of Los Angeles

Mercy is moving, and Comfort
fetches up against the great green
lady I never thought much of before

I hear him say *Abolition* I hear *death*
and destruction. My students say *these old wasps* but
I see Mercy and Comfort enormous,

clumsy, pure, good as icebergs,
and here too the girls, navy nurses,
don their diaphanous yellow, cover their face

Mine eyes dazzle. Those old wasps—
this democracy is not what it seems.
By god I never liked any soldiers. Yet I see

Comfort and Mercy come sailing in I hear
him say *They would be pardoned*

Ahimsa

for Chloe Martinez and Larry Rosenwald

It is not permitted to injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult
torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being. Just as
it is not permitted to send a dog up in space
when you lack the mechanisms to get her down again. The dog
in her million-dollar sardine can, terrified at first, then calming, her nose

like a dark wet blackberry finding the food and water, snuffling,
the dog slowly losing hope, the dog in her despair, the dead dog
orbiting forever, as satellites and missile silos keep proliferating,
soldiers everywhere like molded plastic figurines lost in the grass. It is not permitted

even if you do know how to bring the dog back, it is not permitted for the same reason
that it is not permitted to go to war, or to shoot a rabbit or a child, or to abrogate a foreign border
with a tank—it is not among the things given to you to do. A dog is not for sending to space,
a dog is not for sniffing out mines, or drugs, or terror suspects,
a dog is for leaning your head against in the sunshine as you both pant and smile,
a dog is for leaping through the berry canes. But really,
a dog is for none of these things, a dog is for itself.

If someone takes the body of an animal and simmers it into broth,
or cooks it with beautiful golden onions and potatoes,
or with pomegranate and sumac, and with love, and you receive
that meal with love, it is not that it is not love, but it is still the body
of an animal, as well, as well as the love, do you see, and it is not permitted
to kill an animal which would, after all, like you,
rather live. And it is not permitted to ask

someone else to kill it for you, someone exhausted and sweaty, underpaid and brutalized
from the mechanics of killing all day. Nor is it better if you can say to the one who killed
the animal, *Oh, hello Braeden, how are you, how's the kids*, as he hands you over the pasture fence,
in white grease-proof paper, so satisfying, a portion of a creature whose name
you also knew. This is not more virtuous. You will do it anyway, I understand that, the recruiting
stations and gun shops, the tanks rumbling quiet still on the horizon, I understand you will, but—

Look, people will laugh. If you lift up your arm on a hot day, and say *Who's
biting me?* Not *what* but *who*, to the insect, and brush her away, or cry
when you mash into an inky red dot the mite on the page only because
you didn't want to close her in your book—people will laugh.
People will say, *Now be serious. And you're too smart for this*, but still, it is not permitted.

But may the cat not have his mouse, his dish of meat?
Yes, and you can love the owl who means you do not see
the neighborhood rats, the hawk catching blue mourning doves

out of the air—but you may not rave about that octopus book and then order calamari
at the high two-top with your wine, and the poison
you put out for the rats will kill the owl, too. If to know something

you have to hurt your fellow, then ask what kind of knowledge
it is you have. What do you know if to know it you had to torture
your quiet neighbor the mouse, your brother the chimpanzee? What knowledge
is it really if to have it meant extracting the blood of no less beloved an alien
than the horseshoe crab, who moves like a shield over the mirror
of the mudflat, into the clear water of the lagoon at low tide? The horseshoe
crab, festooned with barnacles and shells, special to children, remember?
Picked up, even, and held, unharmed by them. My brother who loves

the tidepools, who looks inside to see the living and the dead,
had a friend who jumped out of helicopters in the war on terror.
He wanted to be a high school teacher. His knees
are ruined, but he lived, he's back in school, learning just as he wanted
to teach English, it all turned out fine, I guess. And I know,
I know—you'll jump from helicopters, too. Of course
you will. You're going to eat the chicken, you're going

to squish the insect, you're going to hang the rows
of horseshoe crabs like beautiful shields,
draining their blue blood for medicine,
and call it salvation; it will be salvation,

for someone; you are going to put the dog on Mars,
you are going to cross the border with tanks,

you are going to do it, of course you are,
of course you are going to do it.

*The list of prohibited actions in the first stanza come from Jainism and in particular a number of
informative websites for laypeople.*