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The Man Who Measures Animals

James Solheim

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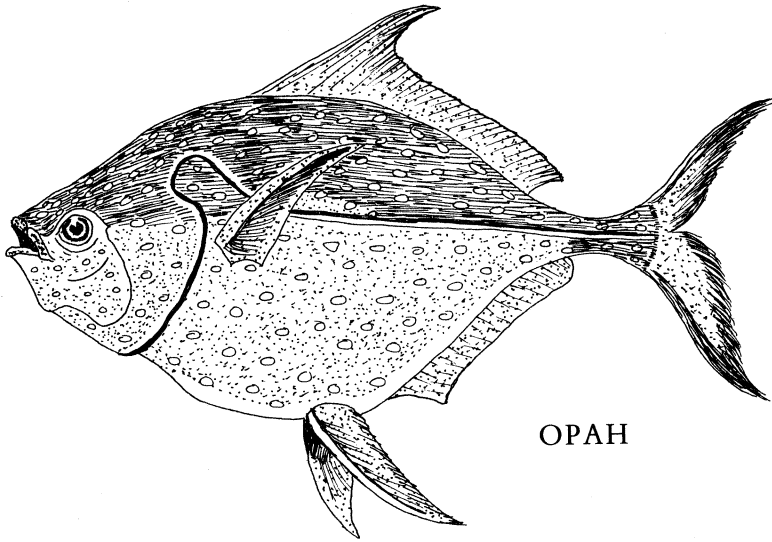


QUETZAL

The Man Who Measures Animals · *James Solheim*

The aye-aye's tail, for one—
Feel how soft it is. Though bufflehead
Is lily-need, cassowary the urge to strut,
Douroucouli a shriek, each has his thoughts.
Eland, fulmar, gerenuk: all can love,
Suzanne, though our love—man's—
Is higher, knowledged. While the gerenuk's
Desire is sometimes
As automatic as an aoudad's irrational ascent,
You don't choose *your* blood's climb, Suzanne,
So don't get superior. My parlour's full
Of hanumans—as spoilt
And dangerous as royalty—
So I know they know both love
And cruel disdain, that they can tease
An indri into hate or languor.
(Look. A jacana walking water. (His weight seems
Almost negative.)) Klipspringer, loris, marabou—
I map them all, a Noah of their statistics,
An Adam naming them
In length and speed and mass. But even should
The number and precision of my stats
Reach an infinity
(There's more than one infinity, of course),
No nilgai nor opah nor phalarope
Would burst from my computer. There is a factor
We can't factor in—
A soul, I'd call it—in flea, fly, phalarope.
Clay hears our feet, and the great rat's breast that holds
The earth (the moon a burning
Drop of milk) steeps fierce, while gorillas
Whomp in our chests and yowl.
How else explain the automatic quetzal
Accordioning to functional beauty!

We're all deus ex machinaed inside,
All changed to harts when we watch our own
Dianas bathe. And yet—when Pax, my cook, rattles
This pulley with fruit each night
(I concede we must eat fruit (but never rorquals,
Saigas, thylacines))—I sometimes
Change my mind about what food I'll take
Simply for the pleasure of knowing I can.
Oh the good clammy muscle of a mushroom
Collapsing in my mouth: Pax always knows what I want.
And what I want is to measure animals—the saiga's
Homely nose, the urutu's pure muscle.
I want to know them to each flip and battle,
Each need as weird as guacamole
On a rune-stave (I'm Mexican and Swedish both,
Suzanne, though mostly British.
I call it hybrid vigour).
In these voiceprints I have vicuña's spit,
Whydah's cry, and xurel's waggle,
Material disturbances caused by their desire
(Which is what any sound
Of any animal is).
Even the yabby, I believe, must feel an odd longing—
Or even love—hunched in his starless burrow,
As must this zyzyva (though I wouldn't call
That thought). A man, however—a man
Should be responsible in this world,
No elephant to his desire.
A man should be no elephant to his desire.
The lorises spring in the ylang-ylang; muntjacs tromple
The fly agaric; and yet—my dear, listen:
Deep in the narcissi, the beefalo
Begin to stir.



OPAH



AYE-AYE

drawings by Gloria Jones