

John Milton (1608–1674)

[Lycidas](#)

Please read this poem in [The John Milton Reading Room](#), ed. Thomas H. Luxon (Dartmouth College, 2023), where you will find annotations to guide you through its densities; please also read James Sitar and Thomas H. Luxon's [introductory note](#).

Marianne Moore (1887–1972)

An Octopus

Following pages: *Observations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dial Press, 1925), 83–90, 105–7. [HathiTrust](#). The poem first appeared in the *Dial* 77 (December 1924): [475–81](#).

AN OCTOPUS

Of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies "in grandeur and in mass"
beneath a sea of shifting snow dunes;
dots of cyclamen red and maroon on its clearly defined
pseudopodia
made of glass that will bend—a much needed invention—
comprising twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hun-
dred feet thick,
of unimagined delicacy.
"Picking periwinkles from the cracks"
or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the
python,
it hovers forward "spider fashion
on its arms" misleading like lace;
its "ghostly pallor changing
to the green metallic tinge of an anemone starred pool."
The fir trees in "the magnitude of their root systems,"
rise aloof from these maneuvers "creepy to behold,"
austere specimens of our American royal families,
"each like the shadow of the one beside it.
The rock seems frail compared with their dark energy of
life,"
its vermillion and onyx and manganese blue interior ex-
pensiveness
left at the mercy of the weather;
"stained transversely by iron where the water drips down,"
recognized by its plants and its animals.
Completing a circle,

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you have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed,
under the polite needles of the larches
“hung to filter not to intercept the sunlight”—
met by tightly wattled spruce twigs
“conformed to an edge like clipped cypress
as if no branch could penetrate the cold beyond its company;”
and dumps of gold and silver ore enclosing The Goat’s
Mirror—
that lady-fingerlike depression in the shape of the left human
foot,
which prejudices you in favor of itself
before you have had time to see the others;
its indigo, pea-green, blue-green, and turquoise,
from a hundred to two hundred feet deep,
“merging in irregular patches in the middle lake
where like gusts of a storm
obliterating the shadows of the firtrees, the wind makes
lanes of ripples.”
What spot could have merits of equal importance
for bears, elk, deer, wolves, goats, and ducks?
Preempted by their ancestors,
this is the property of the exacting porcupine,
and of the rat “slipping along to its burrow in the swamp
or pausing on high ground to smell the heather;”
of “thoughtful beavers
making drains which seem the work of careful men with
shovels,”
and of the bears inspecting unexpectedly
ant hills and berry bushes.
Composed of calcium gems and alabaster pillars,
topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz,
their den is somewhere else, concealed in the confusion
of “blue forests thrown together with marble and jasper and
agate

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as if whole quarries had been dynamited.”
And farther up, in stag-at-bay position
as a scintillating fragment of these terrible stalagmites,
stands the goat,
its eye fixed on the waterfall which never seems to fall—
an endless skein swayed by the wind,
immune to force of gravity in the perspective of the peaks.
A special antelope
acclimated to “grottoes from which issue penetrating
draughts
which make you wonder why you came,”
it stands its ground
on cliffs the color of the clouds, of petrified white vapor—
black feet, eyes, nose, and horns engraved on dazzling ice-
fields,
the ermine body on the crystal peak;
the sun kindling its shoulders to maximum heat like acety-
lene, dyeing them white—
upon this antique pedestal—
“a mountain with those graceful lines which prove it a vol-
cano,”
its top a complete cone like Fujiyama’s
till an explosion blew it off.
Maintaining many minds, distinguished by a beauty
of which “the visitor dare never fully speak at home
for fear of being stoned as an imposter,”
Big Snow Mountain is the home of a diversity of creatures:
those who “have lived in hotels
but who now live in camps—who prefer to”;
the mountain guide evolving from the trapper,
“in two pairs of trousers, the outer one older,
wearing slowly away from the feet to the knees”;
“the nine-striped chipmunk
running with unmammallike agility along a log”;
the water ouzel
with “its passion for rapids and high pressured falls,”

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building under the arch of some tiny Niagara;
the white-tailed ptarmigan" "in winter solid white,
feeding on heather bells and alpine buckwheat";
and the eleven eagles of the west,
"fond of the spring fragrance and the winter colors,"
used to the unegoistic action of the glaciers
and "several hours of frost every midsummer night."
"They make a nice appearance, don't they,"
happy seeing nothing?
Perched on treacherous lava and pumice—
those unadjusted chimney-pots and cleavers
which stipulate "the names and addresses of persons to notify
in case of disaster—"
they hear the roar of ice and supervise the water
winding slowly through the cliffs,
the road "climbing like the thread
which forms the groove around a snail-shell,
doubling back and forth until where snow begins, it ends."
No "deliberate wide-eyed wistfulness" is here
among the boulders sunk in ripples and white water
where "when you hear the best wild music of the mountains
it is sure to be a marmot,"
the victim on some slight observatory,
of "a struggle between curiosity and caution,"
inquiring what has scared it:
a stone from the moraine descending in leaps,
another marmot, or the spotted ponies with "glass eyes,"
brought up on frosty grass and flowers
and rapid draughts of ice water. }
Instructed none knows how, to climb the mountain,
by "business men who as totemic scenery of Canada,
require for recreation,
three hundred and sixty-five holidays in the year,
these conspicuously spotted little horses are peculiar;
hard to discern among the birch trees, ferns, and lily pads,
avalanche lilies, Indian paintbrushes,

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bears' ears and kittentails,
and miniature cavalcades of chlorophyllless fungi
magnified in profile on the mossbeds like moonstones in the
water;
the cavalcade of calico competing
with the original American "menagerie of styles"
among the white flowers of the rhodendron surmounting
rigid leaves
upon which moisture works its alchemy,
transmuting verdure into onyx.
Larkspur, blue pincushions, blue peas, and lupin;
white flowers with white, and red with red;
the blue ones "growing close together
so that patches of them look like blue water in the distance":
this arrangement of colors
as in Persian designs of hard stones with enamel,
forms a pleasing equation—
a diamond outside and inside, a white dot;
on the outside, a ruby; inside, a red dot;
black spots balanced with black
in the woodlands where fires have run over the ground—
separated by aspens, cats' paws, and woolly sunflowers,
fireweed, asters, and Goliath thistles
"flowering at all altitudes as multiplicitous as barley,"
like pink sapphires in the pavement of the glistening plateau.
Inimical to "bristling, puny, swearing men
equipped with saws and axes,"
this treacherous glass mountain
admires gentians, ladyslippers, harebells, mountain dryads,
and "Calypso, the goat flower—
that greenish orchid fond of snow"—
anomalously nourished upon shelving glacial ledges
where climbers have not gone or have gone timidly,
"the one resting his nerves while the other advanced,"
on this volcano with the bluejay, her principal companion.
"Hopping stiffly on sharp feet" like miniature icehacks—

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“secretive, with a look of wisdom and distinction, but a
villain,
fond of human society or the crumbs that go with it,”
he knows no Greek,
“that pride producing language,”
in which “rashness is rendered innocuous, and error exposed
by the collision of knowledge with knowledge.”
“Like happy souls in Hell,” enjoying mental difficulties,
the grasshoppers of Greece
amused themselves with delicate behavior
because it was “so noble and so fair”;
not practised in adapting their intelligence
to eagle traps and snowshoes,
to alpenstocks and other toys contrived by those
“alive to the advantage of invigorating pleasures.”
Bows, arrows, oars, and paddles for which trees provide the
wood,
in new countries are more eloquent than elsewhere—
augmenting evidence for the assertion
that essentially humane,
“the forest affords wood for dwellings and by its beauty
stimulates
the moral vigor of its citizens.”
The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was back
of what could not be clearly seen,
resolving with benevolent conclusiveness,
“complexities which still will be complexities
as long as the world lasts”;
ascribing what we clumsily call happiness,
to “an accident or a quality,
a spiritual substance or the soul itself,
an act, a disposition, or a habit,
or a habit infused to which the soul has been persuaded,
or something distinct from a habit, a power—”
such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of.
“Emotionally sensitive, their hearts were hard”;

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their wisdom was remote
from that of these odd oracles of cool official sarcasm,
upon this game preserve
where "guns, nets, seines, traps and explosives,
hired vehicles, gambling and intoxicants are prohibited,
disobedient persons being summarily removed
and not allowed to return without permission in writing."

It is self evident
that it is frightful to have everything afraid of one;
that one must do as one is told
and eat "rice, prunes, dates, raisins, hardtack, and tomatoes"
if one would "conquer the main peak" of Mount Takoma
this fossil flower concise without a shiver,
intact when it is cut,
damned for its sacrosanct remoteness—
like Henry James "damned by the public for decorum";
not decorum, but restraint;
it was the love of doing hard things
that rebuffed and wore them out—a public out of sympathy
with neatness.

Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!
Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus
with its capacity for fact.
"Creeping slowly as with meditated stealth,
its arms seeming to approach from all directions,"
it receives one under winds that "tear the snow to bits
and hurl it like a sandblast,
shearing off twigs and loose bark from the trees."
Is tree the word for these strange things
"flat on the ground like vines";
some "bent in a half circle with branches on one side
suggesting dustbrushes, not trees;
some finding strength in union, forming little stunted
groves,
their flattened mats of branches shrunk in trying to escape"

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from the hard mountain "planed by ice and polished by the
wind"—

the white volcano with no weather side;
the lightning flashing at its base,
rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak—
the glassy octopus symetrically pointed,
its claw cut by the avalanche
"with a sound like the crack of a rifle,
in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall."

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proceed pretty dolls when they leave their old home to renovate their frame, and dear others who may abandon their peaceful husband only because they have seen enough of him."

"Everything to do with love is mystery": F. C. Tilney; *The Original Fables of La Fontaine*; Dutton. Love and Folly: Book XII, No. 14.

"I am such a cow": remark in conversation; Miss M. H. Tolman

"Liberty and Union": Daniel Webster

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My father used to say: a remark in conversation; Miss A. M. Homans, Professor Emeritus of Hygiene, Wellesley College. "My father used to say, 'superior people never make long visits; then people are not so glad when you've gone.' When I am visiting, I like to go about by myself. I never had to be shown Longfellow's grave nor the glass flowers at Harvard."

"Make my house your inn": Edmund Burke to a stranger with whom he had fallen into conversation in a bookshop. *Life of Burke*: James Prior; " 'Throw yourself into a coach,' said he. 'Come down and make my house your inn.' "

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glass that will bend: Sir William Bell of the British Institute of Patentees has made a list of inventions which he says the world needs. The list includes glass that will bend; a smooth road surface that will not be slippery in wet weather; a furnace that will conserve 95 per cent. of its heat; a process to make flannel unshrinkable; a noiseless airplane; a motor engine of one pound weight per horse-power; methods to reduce friction; a process to extract phosphorus from vulcanized India rubber so that it can be boiled up and used again; practical ways of utilizing the tides

"Picking periwinkles": M. C. Carey; *London Graphic*, August 25, 1923

"spider fashion": W. P. Pycraft; *Illustrated London News*, June 28, 1924

"ghostly pallor": Francis Ward; *Illustrated London News*, August 11, 1923

"magnitude of their root systems": John Muir

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"creepy to behold": W. P. Pycraft

"each like the shadow of the one beside it": Ruskin

"conformed to an edge": W. D. Wilcox; The Rockies of Canada; Putnam, 1903

"thoughtful beavers": Clifton Johnson; What to See in America; Macmillan

"blue stone forests": Clifton Johnston; What to See in America

"grottoes": W. D. Wilcox; The Rockies of Canada

"two pairs of trousers": W. D. Wilcox. "My old packer, Bill Peyto. He usually wears two pairs of trousers, one over the other, the outer pair about six months older. Every once in a while, Peyto would give one or two nervous yanks at the fringe and tear off the longer pieces, so that his outer trousers disappeared day by day from below upwards."

"deliberate wide eyed wistfulness": Olivia Howard Dunbar; review of Alice Meynell's prose; Post Literary Review, June 16, 1923. "There is no trace here of deliberate wide eyed wistfulness."

marmot: W. P. Taylor, Assistant Biologist, Bureau of Biological Survey, U. S. Department of Agriculture; "The clear and penetrating whistle of the hoary marmot is perhaps the best wild music of the mountains."

"glass eyes": W. D. Wilcox. A colourless condition of the retina, characteristic of the Indian pony or cayuse

"business men": W. D. Wilcox: "A crowd of the business men of Banff, who usually take about 365 holidays every year, stands around to offer advice."

"menagerie of styles": W. M. The Mystery of an Adjective and of Evening Clothes; London Graphic, June 21, 1924: "Even in the Parisian menagerie of styles there remains this common feature that evening dress is always evening dress in men's wear. With women there is no saying whether a frock is meant for tea, dinner, or for breakfast in bed."

"bristling, puny, swearing men": Clifton Johnson

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"They make a nice appearance, don't they?": Comment overheard at the circus

"Greek, that pride-producing language": Anthony Trollope; *An Autobiography*; Oxford University Press

"rashness is rendered innocuous": Cardinal Newman; *Historical Sketches*

"Like happy souls in hell": Richard Baxter; *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*

"so noble and so fair": Cardinal Newman; *Historical Sketches*

"complexities . . . an accident": Richard Baxter

"The Greeks were emotionally sensitive": W. D. Hyde; *The Five Great Philosophies*; Macmillan

"creeping slowly": Francis Ward

"tear the snow"; "flat on the ground"; "bent in a half circle": Clifton Johnson

"with a sound like the crack of a rifle": W. D. Wilcox

Quoted descriptions of scenery and of animals, of which the source is not given, have been taken from government pamphlets on our national parks

SEA UNICORNS AND LAND UNICORNS, p. 91

"mighty monoceroses": Spenser

"disquiet shippers": Violet A. Wilson—*Queen Elizabeth's Maids of Honour*, (Lane)—quotes Olaus Magnus; *History of the Goths and Swedes*: "The sea serpent: he hath commonly hair hanging from his neck a cubit long, and sharp scales and is black, and he hath flaming shining eyes. This snake disquiets shippers and he puts up his head like a pillar, and catcheth away men."

a voyager: Violet A. Wilson; *Queen Elizabeth's Maids of Honour*. Thomas Cavendish: "He sailed up the Thames in splendour, the sails of his ship being cloth of gold and his seamen clad in rich silks. Many were the curiosities which the explorers brought home as presents for the ladies. The Queen naturally

A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993)
Elements of Composition

Composed as I am, like others,
 of elements on certain well-known lists,
father's seed and mother's egg

5 gathering earth, air, fire, mostly
 water, into a mulberry mass,
 moulding calcium,

 carbon, even gold, magnesium and such,
 into a chattering self tangled
in love and work,

10 scary dreams, capable of eyes that can see,
 only by moving constantly,
the constancy of things

like Stonehenge or cherry trees;

15 add uncle's eleven fingers
 making shadow-plays of rajas
and cats, hissing,

 becoming fingers again, the look
 of panic on sister's face
an hour before

20 her wedding, a dated newspaper map
 of a place one has never seen, maybe
no longer there

 after the riots, downtown Nairobi,
 that a friend carried in his passport
25 as others would

a woman's picture in their wallets;

add the lepers of Madurai,
male, female, married,
with children,

30 lion faces, crabs for claws,
clotted on their shadows
under the stone-eyed

goddesses of dance, mere pillars,
moving as nothing on earth
35 can move—

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving

affections, seeds, skeletons,
40 millennia of fossil records
of insects that do not last
a day,

body-prints of mayflies,
a legend half-heard
45 in a train

of the half-man searching
for an ever-fleeing
other half

through Muharram tigers,
50 hyacinths in crocodile waters,
and the sweet

twisted lives of epileptic saints,

and even as I add,
I lose, decompose
55 into my elements,

into other names and forms,

past, and passing, tenses
without time,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten.

60

The Collected Poems Of A. K. Ramanujan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 121–122. [Literature Online](#).
The poem appeared in *Second Sight* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986). My notes follow.

13 *Stonehenge*: the archaic monument in the South of England.

13 *cherry trees*: in Japan and elsewhere, the cherry blossom is a symbol of transience.

27 *Madurai*: city in Tamil Nadu, in the south of India.

46 *the half-man searching*: in one Brahmanic (ancient Hindu) creation myth, the creator splits himself or falls apart into two halves, male and female. Ramanujan compares this to the split persons imagined in Plato's *Symposium* in a 1994 essay, "[Some Thoughts on 'Non-Western' Classics](#)," *World Literature Today* 68, no. 2 (Spring 1994), 334.

49 *Muharram tigers*: Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. In South India, the martyrdom of Hussein, Muhammad's grandson, is commemorated—[by Hindus as well as Muslims](#)—by processions in which participants may wear tiger masks.

59–60 *eating, / being eaten*: in the same essay cited just above, Ramanujan translates a passage from another Brahmanic text, the *Taittirīya-Upanishad*, on what he calls the "Food-Chain, Sanskrit Style" ("[Some Thoughts](#)," 333):

From food, from food,
creatures, all creatures,
come to be.

...
And what eats is eaten,
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.

A. R. Ammons (1926–2001)
[Corsons Inlet](#)

Please read this poem online at the [Poetry Foundation](#). Its first book publication was in *Corsons Inlet: A Book of Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 5–8. Corsons Inlet is in [Cape May County](#); there is now a [State Park](#) there (created a few years after Ammons wrote the poem).