Meantime / Dreamtime

(or, How I spent my summer vacation)

I board the plane
and the stewardess says
with a quizzical look
at my boarding pass
"You're the vegetarian?"

I dream of the day
when a traveller will board
and the steward will say
with a questioning rise of his eyebrow...
"You're the carnivore?"

but, in the meantime
a woman cries
an animal dies
and the Indians dream of home

(there's a paper in my pocket
with some numbers written on it
I feel the numbers throb
and the phrase that sets the beat
hammers at my chest
"every fifteen seconds
a woman is beaten by a man she knows"
this time she lives
only her joy is dead)

I'm in a car
on a country road
sitting next to one
who cries, "Look! Cows!
Stop the car.
They are so beautiful!
I will commune with cows!"
and she wafts to the fence
her sentiment flying
above the white-faced red
ones who so placidly chew
and happily nuzzle
their wobbly calves
post card pretty to be sure
and I think (not kindly, I confess)
*commune with the cow
that rots in your gut*

*commune with her
for my car-mate
had cow for lunch*

I dream of the day
when cows can be
for the beauty they give
a landscape (in small numbers)
and the comfort they find
in each other
and in being garlanded with
flowers by children
who love them
and tell them secrets

in the meantime
a woman cries
an animal dies
and the Indians dream of home

at a Chippewa pow wow
the dancers stop
when an eagle's feather is found
on the grass fallen
from a dancer's lance
an elder appears
sprinkles a sacred substance
he carries in a pouch
speaks the sacred words
before touching the feather
bearing it with reverence
off the dancing ground

I am on the highway
a possum lies dead by the road
a raccoon lies dead by the road—
no—two together
a turtle crosses, life's burden upon her back
she makes her slow slow way
across the hot road
miraculously missing
wheels spinning death
out on the highway
a porcupine lies dead on the road

a young doe lies dead on the road
 her body of exquisite grace
 and delicacy lies crumpled
 and broken dead by the road
 an obscene testament
 to our going places so fast
 (where did anyone have to go that was worth the loss
 of this beauty and gentleness?)
 (the numbers throb against my chest
 "every 15 seconds
 a woman is beaten by a man she knows"
 this time she lives
 only her dreams have died)
 a badger lies dead by the road
 a possum lies dead by the road
 a squirrel lies dead by the road

I dream of the day
 when the wheels will turn more slowly and if
 we kill it is with sorrow
 and in grief will we stop
 and look upon what we have done
 and bear the broken body of
 whomever we've destroyed
 bear it with reverence from the killing ground
 chant the sacred song
 and make atonement till the killing stops

but in the meantime
 a woman cries
 an animal dies
 and the Indians dream of home

I see on TV
 a woman is raped by her father
 from the time she is three
 until she is 18 and tries to kill him
 she is convicted of attempting murder
 she is in prison
 he is free

(the numbers beat against my chest
 "every 15 seconds
 a woman is beaten by a man
 by a man she knows"
 this time she dies)

I dream of the day
 when a woman's body is as much her own as is a man's
 I dream of the day when the life of a woman
 is as valued as
 the life of a man

in the meantime
 the animals cry
 the women die
 an Indian dreams of home

Paulette Callen