... AND HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS (MARK 1:13)

I. He went into the wilderness to fast and pray.
   After forty days and nights they came
   as He knew they would, as He had hoped they would not:
   the fears and doubts, desires, despair.
   His humanness raged within Him.
   He cried for humanity and for Himself.
   He fought a human's battle with only human weapons.

II. Ragged and weary
    in unproud triumph
    He lies in sand
    awash in wind
    and sun, asleep.
    They come,
    one by one,
    and form a gathering,
    silent as Quakers
    and just as full:
    the beasts.
    No angel,
    Jew, or Gentile,
    but the lion stands
    in ageing majesty,
    against the sun
    creating with himself
    a cool shadow
    for His rest.
    Pariah dogs,
    lupine, devoted,
    he on one side,
    she on the other,
    lick His face clean
    of tears and sweat,
    awakening Him
    to tickly tongues
    and wolfy grins.
    The lizard, kaleidoscoping
    green and brown
    and rose scuttles
    into the shelter
    of His sleeve,
    while the locusti,
    God's soldier, flutters
    to His knee to rest.

Paulette Callen
Nutley, New Jersey
all pink and glowing
in the sunset. The vulture
with feathers tucked modestly
beneath her like a taffeta
skirt, sits, a gleaming black
matron, beside
the school-girl dove
who has followed Him
and watched over Him
since His cousin's watery
blessing. The snake
pretty and sleek,
coils humbly, contentedly,
at His feet,
shining like
a jewel in the light
of the rising moon.
The ram, escaped
from the safety and bloody
end of the flock --
gone wild,
gone free --
stands serene,
blinking in the twilight.
A desert rat,
soft and brown,
climbs into His lap,
puts tiny feet
up on His chest
to examine Him, close,
with earnest dark eyes
and snuffling nostrils.
Satisfied all
is well with Him now,
he scurries away
on a private mission.
The jackal, shying
among the shadows.
He calls
into the circle.

Who knows the mind of a beast or the mind of God?
Who can tell what flows between?

The lion weeps
As He strokes his shagged
and scarry face.
Gripping the grizzled mane
He rises
and they lead Him to water.
The rat erupts
from a tiny dune
with figs for His nourishment
from a personal trove.
Refreshed, He plays
with them. The dogs,
wiggling, eager
for games, play tag
with Him. The ram
joins in. The vulture
and the dove, silhouetted
against the moon
dance and dive
to His applause
as the lizard somersaults
in miraculous circles
between earth and sky.
The locust clings
to His shoulder, informally
keeping score.
And the snake rising
in her delicate spiral
sways in soundless harmony
to the rhythm of their play.
The jackel chuckles,
sprawled like a pup
on the sand, belly up,
feet akimbo, giving in
to the joys of the romp.
Even the lion
remembers some kittenish
glee in a mock wrestle
with this gentle man.

I thought I heard an echo of something said
at a place in the desert a long time ago
where a man went to find Himself and finally
breaking His solitude before His fast sought the company
of animals. Why he did this is not so hard to fathom.
Why does anyone seek the company of animals? For refreshment
and companionship,
and a communion unattainable with most of our own kind.
Perhaps this man had deeper reasons.
And He, unlike most, might have known how to speak to them
in a language
they could understand. The echo I hear is this:
“No more scapegoats, my friends.
No more sacrifices.
No more blood of the lamb
on the alter stone.
No more dead pigeons.
No more an eye for an eye,
a tooth for a tooth.
I AM the eye.
I AM the tooth.
Humans are a blood loving race.
(The earth has never cried for blood,
nor the heavens either.)
Their hunger and thirst
for flesh and blood shall be sated.
I AM become you.
And this is the beginning of the end.”

And so the lion wept.

IV. They came, across miles, some of them,
and formed a gathering:
the lion, the ram,
the jackal, and the locust,
the lizard, pariah dogs,
the snake, the vulture,
the dove (she had never
really left Him),
and the small brown rat ....
they were there, on the misty heels
of the angel who rolled away the stone,
before the Mary’s, to greet Him
in quiet, doubt – less, welcome,
when He walked out of the tomb.