

# The Flood

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It began with a wind murmuring in an ancient and new voice; the sea nations heard, and only one man. He told his wife who said, "Ah, you're drunk again." His sons thought the same. Their wives said nothing and listened. They, too, heard the voice of the wind and gathering close their garments, grew quieter still. They brought cool water to their father-in-law as he, in obedience to the voice, hauled rough-cut planks of cedar—hard labor for a six-hundred-year-old man.

His sons watched their wives and then began to listen and soon to hear and help their father. The old man's wife never heard the voice, but kept them fed and washed, clothes clean and mended, and dreamed of being a grandmother.

*Poised in twilight, she quivered from nose to tail, smelling, feeling, awash in the wind. He stepped out of the blackness of the trees, received her gaze; utterly still they fathomed each other and the wind. Delicate, carved, polished, black, adamantine hooves tamped ground, then gracile limbs powered by iron-sprung haunches and chests, deep and wide for drinking the wind, leapt together into the wind-tide, eastward, the stag and his mate.*

*The wind furred the backs of the pack lounging outside the den, digesting their kill and watching pups stalk and maul each other. It was not the alpha wolf who rose, shook himself, pricked his ears, and began to lope due east, moon rising in his eyes, but a young dog a year before his prime. The she-wolf running east converged and matched her strides with his. They covered ground their huge feet did not seem to touch, running swiftly, running for days on end, running without rest, without weariness, as if born on the wind itself.*

*The Matriarch wept and flung her head  
side to side, swaying and stamping in grief.  
Her sister, close, caressed her, but she would not be  
soothed. A wind had swept over them at the watering  
place. The young one had lifted her trunk to test it,  
closed her eyes and seemed to go within.  
The Matriarch watched, helpless to affect some terrible  
thing she knew was happening, as her daughter, favored  
child, stepped up out of the water, trotted  
into the wind and left the family. (The bull saw  
her coming, tiny by his measure, and his eyes filled  
with tears. He'd known many females who'd suffered his attention  
but this one, so young, would need his care.)*

*Among twigs  
and leaves, across vines and loose stones, huge  
paws landed and broke nothing, disturbed  
nothing, made no sound: a step  
he could maintain at all but his top speed.  
He moved, shadow among shadows, knowing she was there,  
not by her scent, for she was not in season,  
nor by her cry, for she had made none.  
Gold with green gold eyes, she waited.  
He approached. A growl began by instinct  
surged from his belly but he ignored it and she,  
before the wind, would have feared him, who now whirled  
and without caution began to run. He  
was a loner, but he would go with her. He had been chosen.*

*Thus the wind, the wind of doom, the reckoning  
wind, wind of the Lord's own sorrow, swept the  
earth, Destroyer and Preserver. For as it summoned the clouds and  
churned the waters it chose some to cipher its  
message. Antennae throbbed, whiskers maneuvered,  
tails twitched, and sticky red tongues  
snapped out to taste the wind. Guard  
hairs stood erect, muscles tightened  
and released in speed or lumbering strength, in stealth  
or ground-close scurrying, each according to his  
nature, each according to her kind. From dens and  
aeries, balmy plains and the murky depths of  
jungle and swamp; from blazoned snow-lands, dappled  
forest worlds and shadowless deserts, they came.  
Answering the wind. Each in his own way.  
Each in her own time. They came.*

Noah stood at the threshold of the ark, chills  
shot up his spine in spite of the heat. His knees  
shook and his eyes streamed. (He was always maudlin

in his cups, but he'd had nothing to drink for weeks.) He had built the ark in obedience, on faith, knowing for whom he was building it. For *them*. But seeing them—in their numbers, in their unbearable humility, in their strength and fragility—he wept.

The first

to come had been the birds, alighting on the roof of the ark. Many flew by but did not light. All the birds in the world could have landed on the ark, sinking it into the mud where it stood, but they did not—only the chosen, from little brown birds, so plain they disappeared against the rough wood, to birds of such bright plumage they took his breath, he had never seen such glory. Such ones existed in the world! He hadn't dreamed.

They came without fear  
two by two. The horizon flowed  
rivers of beings: multitudinous forms,  
shaggy and sleek, scaled and smooth.

They came hopping on twos,  
prancing on fours; feet padded,  
flipped, and clawed, webbed, and hooved,  
or slithered on none making good time still.

They came shells on their backs,  
pouches on their fronts, horns on their heads  
or protruding out their mouths; in colors of rainbows,  
and of old leaves. The clowns. The majestics.

They came, eyes like moons  
or setting suns, like mossy pools  
sunlit from below, like fire-lit ice  
or haunted brown of unknown depths.

They came with fingers and toes,  
grasping tails and old-man-like faces,  
scampering up the ramp like wizened children.  
Lizards of a size that could only have been spawned  
from his most drunken nightmare, steadfastly plodded  
up the gangplank. Tiny, many-eyed,  
many-legged creatures floated by him,  
or clung to the backs and heads and tails  
of larger folk possibly unfelt by them.  
(There he saw a spider with her mate—  
he fat and sleepy, looking forward to her spinning  
them a silver traveling berth; she deigning not  
to eat him for the present.) They came, fantastic,

beloved of God. All to be cared for.  
*This is my work.* The old man trembled  
and wanted a drink.

For days and nights they came, and Noah's sons  
took turns holding him up as he greeted  
each one who entered the ark. Then came  
the last two: a small white dog  
and a small brown one. Noah didn't know  
which was the he and which the she, but it didn't  
matter. The clouds boiled white froth  
that congealed into a black tide that rolled from earth's  
edge to earth's edge. Light and color  
drowned in a sea of black. Lightning screeched  
through the heavens like pain; the Earth roared in anguish  
as she opened; her fountains gushed from the deep.

Then Noah

and his sons closed the ark, huddled in the lower  
deck, and listened to the wrath of God. The boat  
trembled and bravely stood the scathing wind  
wielding the sword of purgation—water: sustainer  
of all life, now become destroyer.  
The ark shuddered as if to break apart  
as the ground was lost to water, and the old man  
prayed, *Please let this thing float.* It did.  
Still he could not rest. He thought he heard  
the wailing of all mankind. He wept bitterly  
and covered his head and could not hear the singing  
and did not notice the silence of the animals both inside  
and outside the ark.

His daughters-in-law quietly  
roamed the vessel stroking soft noses,  
scratching ears, filling troughs, mangers,  
and bowls. The small, hairy creatures with their old-man-  
faces, embraced them, played with their earrings, stole their  
bracelets, chattered and made them laugh. The two  
little dogs trotted after them, fearing  
no one, not even the old bull elephant (wisdom  
having its place in the ark along with fecundity)  
who was the resident giant, even beside the mammoth  
female (of whom he was greatly solicitous for she missed  
her mother), for he was good and always looked  
before he stepped. The birds of every kind,  
each with his own song, filled the decks  
with music. The cats lapped milk and purred  
and licked themselves all over until they gleamed  
in the torch-lit hold. The wolves and bears munched

heavy cakes made with every kind of  
grain and oil and herb, licked each other  
and dozed in beds of straw. The cows, ewes,  
and she-goats mothered the voyagers with their milk, and chewed  
their grasses in the shadows of proud bulls and rams.  
Creeping things spun themselves into pods  
and dangled from the rafters to emerge later in celebration.

After forty days and nights the wailing ceased,  
wind and rain withdrew; the singing subsided.  
The ark came to rest on still water. Noah  
uncovered his head. He opened a window and peered  
out. Everywhere was water and nothing nothing  
else. The wives of Shem, Ham, and Japheth  
climbed to the outside deck, breathed hungrily,  
loosed their hair and bared their skin to the sun.  
They scanned the watery world for the singers. What kind  
of beings must they be? Angels? They had,  
of course, to be angels. Would they show themselves?  
Then they saw a blackness shadowing still and  
strong from the depths of the sea. They heard a mighty  
rumble and swoosh! as the waters parted. Out  
of the sea before them rose leviathan—first  
of creation. She cleft the water—an impossible ascent  
from liquid to air, the only solid thing,  
herself, whirling and falling on her side in a sea-  
displacing splash. Her hieroglyphic flukes  
smacked the surface as she dived—in the distance, two  
more such ones of a size they could scarcely  
comprehend, never having seen mountains at play.  
The women felt no fear. As if to reassure  
them anyway, the little shepherds of the sea appeared,  
dancing around the boat. The women began  
to clap and dance. Their men joined in.  
Even Noah's wife peered in awe  
at the smiling behemoths and the small ones frolicking  
about their tiny ark in the great great  
vastness of the spangled sea. The survivors of God's  
anger beheld the beings who flourished beneath  
the waves, and wondered, and felt at peace.

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For the sea nations had not brought down the Lord's  
regret. They shown like shining lights in God's  
eyes. The small ones had asked, in pity for their earth-  
bound brothers and sisters, that they might,  
with dolphin mind and agile corporeal forms,  
encompass and surround them to ease their passage. This

the Lord allowed. The giants of the sea, too,  
felt compassion for the creatures of the land, for the terror  
that was theirs to come. *What can we do?* they  
prayed. *We are so large, we will  
add to their terror if they see us coming at them  
through the waves. The little ones among  
them won't even be able to see us as we are.  
We will be to them like walls, like mountains,  
like dark moons. Give us a means to comfort  
them.* The Lord heard their prayer and gifted  
them with song. And when the rains came  
they began to sing and filled the earth and skies  
and waters with their songs, and the animals stopped scrambling  
in fear and listened and were comforted and waited as the waters  
rose. The spheres resounded with song from the little  
blue planet for an awesome thing was happening  
there. And as the waters rose the shepherds came—  
the dolphins—leaping and laughing, beaming serenity  
to guide them in joy and peace; compassion filled  
the stormy seas as they surrounded each  
dying creature with love easing him  
or her into the next world. *Be not  
afraid. Nothing dies, all  
is spirit. All is reborn. Be at peace.*

But men fought each other for higher ground,  
lost their senses, wailing and cursing, so they could  
not hear the whales singing them hope and comfort,  
nor feel dolphin mind ready to guide them  
safely from the disappearing earth to the infinite realm  
of light and spirit. Drowned in the maelstrom of their own  
lamentations, mankind passed over into darkness  
in needless anguish and wandered till their rage was spent  
and their fear dissolved. It took a long time  
for them to find their way to the light.

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The ark floated on. The whales sang  
now to comfort the survivors who sometimes howled  
in anguish over lost tribes, or trumpeted in grief  
for memories of wrinkled faces and loving eyes,  
or paced, restless for a territory to study and conquer.  
And Noah prayed his prayers morning  
and evening and fondled the seeds in his pocket that held  
the promise of new vines. His wife comforted  
him and kept a close eye on the bellies  
of her daughters-in-law. Ham, Shem, and Japhet  
kept the boat in repair. It would leak.

And the young women loved and nurtured and were loved  
and nurtured by the creatures on the ark. The wind  
rose again, rocking the ark like a cradle.  
The sky stayed bright, the sun hot,  
and the waters receded.

The birds left first.

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The sea of water turned to a sea of mud and still, all but the birds could not go far, but the wind sucked the mud dry, and the earth became firm and even green, and the rainbow came, sign of the covenant He had made, the Lord God, with the race of men and the species, every one, He had saved on the ark. And to the minds in the waters who had served the earth's creatures in their dying hours, the Lord God said, "You will save and shepherd mankind and sing for the peace of all living things. This is your covenant, first of my children. But you will pay dearly, for the riders of the ark have inherited corruption. You will have to sing them back again and again."

The singing hasn't stopped.

