

THE MEETINGS OF WEARTH
BY JEANNE C. WILKINSON

The First Meeting
WEarth Cycle CCCXCVI

The Congress of Animals

The animals gathered where a great river bled into the sea. They came from land, sea and sky to make known their complaints and damages, and to plan. From puddle and pond, meadow and mountain, desert and forest, they moved in vast streams and eddies to their meeting place at the edge of a great ocean. One by one, two by two, many by many, the congress of creatures grew until their numbers stretched further than even the sharpest soaring eye could see.

Even so, they were less than before. Certain areas once covered with life were now empty, holes in a vast unraveling quilt. Ragged but still beautiful, this was Wild Earth, or WEarth.

Madame Lion, President of Wearth Cycle CCCXCVI, stood quietly on a craggy boulder rising above the river, a place of honor known as the Speaker's Rock. From atop this ancient monolith of granite and quartz, she watched the animals merge and spread below her like a vast living carpet. From above, the yellow Sun poured blessings downward, lighting up the creatures of WEarth like so many shining jewels and transforming the lioness's tawny fur into gleaming gold.

In the glow of Sun's rays, Madame Lion meditated on the tasks ahead which must be met with strength, fortitude, courage--attributes she knew to be her strong suits. But she also knew of others in her position, as strong and brave as she (or nearly), who had failed to fulfill their responsibilities. One need only think of Saber-Tooth Tiger's cycle as President to understand what another such failure might mean to the animals--quite possibly a final disastrous rending of the weave of WEarth...a further fragmenting...with all the beautiful designs and complex patterns disintegrating into bits of dust blown about by Sister Winds...

An innate sense of discipline kept the President from letting loose the deep ionic sigh that welled within and threatened to grow into a great howling roar--instead, she gave herself over to the warm benediction of a benevolent Sun and turned her thoughts to executive duties. Some time ago, she had decided to begin the Meeting with the Silence Ceremony, something a lesser President, fearful of damages if done poorly, might have hesitated to invoke. But the daunting problems facing WEarth demanded bold moves, and Madame Lion was nothing if not bold.

She herself had never participated in the Silence Rituals nor even seen them performed. But by tapping into the WEarth Reservoir of Knowledge (the WROK), that vast inner resource common to all Wild animals where all experience is coded, collected and stored, she had found the source of the Silence Ceremony.

And there she had learned, not without difficulty, the following information:

In the Beginning there was Silence.

The Center, Silence; Silence, the Center.

Later, when Time began its run, Silence retreated, spiraling away beyond temporal perimeters, out of reach of the din of Time and his kin. But protocols were laid down regarding a way to invoke Silence again, to reconnect Time-bound souls to the Center, if desired, with invocations requiring ego suspension, mutual trust and absolute (if momentary) harmonic blending of desire. Also, all those taking part in the rituals must have knowledge (instinctual or learned) of dimensional merging, plus at least a Level Two understanding of paradox.

The latter skill is a birthright of all Wild animals but not necessarily of Domesticates, many of whom long ago lost the ability to tell a paradox from a hole in the ground. Thus, while the Silence Ceremony used to be performed by all living creatures; now it is done almost entirely by Wilds. The rituals are extremely rare, and the more rare, the more dangerous--a strong, competent leader is needed to prevent potential disaster.

Madame Lion had prepared well for this moment. Yet she felt a small frisson of...what was it...fear? No, not fear...fear had no hold in the lion mind...but something else--a question, perhaps.

Could she, at the crucial moment, do what needed to be done?

The warm cooperation of Sun, never to be counted on, was a sign to her that the ceremony would succeed, and maybe, just maybe, all would be well. Ordinarily, the activities of the Powers--Sun, Moon, Wind, Water, and Fire--lie well outside the animals' purview. Indeed, most creatures of flesh, bone and otherwise have learned to take what comes and adapt accordingly. The animals try to plan WEarth meetings for relatively quiet times--the better to hear themselves think--but they can never be sure what the concurrent Power agenda will be.

Against her better judgment, the lioness thought if only...if only she could be sure of Sun's continued cooperation, perhaps the hazardous Silence Ceremony could be avoided altogether...

Maybe, she mused in a moment of optimism, it will be a calm cycle with the Sister Winds fussing over Sun...Sun herself more than happy to join in the game...wind-fingers long and

graceful, playing dress-up, draping their golden-girl in endless combinations of veils, shawls, morning dresses, evening gowns...oh, maybe a few breezy tiffs...no, no, dear...that silver lace won't do...try it in pink...ummm...what about a bit of salmon piping on that lavender collar...Oh, that's IT! Beautiful! Perfect! No, wait...we need some rose striping on that blue underskirt...

Oh, what was she thinking? Illusions burst like bright bubbles as the lioness shook off her idle daydreams, mindful that relying on the Powers is like trusting a river to stop its flow, like wishing for rain! Flights of fancy gave way to pragmatism as she pondered over the many matters of profound importance that had developed during the the current WEarth Cycle-- issues far too critical to be cast aside by a petulant Sun, impatient with one too many wispy bits of frou-frou hanging about her shoulders, shrugging off Sister Wind's clinging fingers to flaunt her golden body bare as the day she was born, blazing round and naked and free in the blue embrace of Brother Sky, not caring a whit for the Winds' bitter fits of pique...

...and then...the Sisters angry, weeping, weaving dark warrior-garb instead of bright sunset-gowns, calling clouds to clot in swirling knots of fire-breathing dragon-rage, roaring, racing, chasing Brother Sky up and up and up, on and on and on, until finally, finally, Sun, tired of her tantrum, tilts a shining eye earthward to blink a great curving wink at the world, flirting in rainbow colors, chasing away the the blues, the grays, deigning to let the newly appeased Sisters grace her golden shoulders once again with a shimmery boa--white, with peach undertones, no, no, why not shot with silver...oh, silver, silver, always silver...why not a touch of pink this time...

Well! Even without all this Sturm und Drang to disturb WEarth meetings, the wise Lioness knew that merely a Cloud Carnival, or a simple game of Shake-Shake-Quake, or a short session of Boom-a-Laka-Boom could cause no end of problems. Indeed, from her high perch she saw dark clouds whipping and sparks flying over the distant sea...Wind and Water playing another round of Bolts and Ladders...oh yes, she mused, this is the beauty of the Silence Ceremony, and why it is so necessary--it will stop the infernal, eternal Power-Games long enough for the animals to take care of business!

Or so she hoped...

In any case, the Silence Ceremony must be done, and done perfectly.

But the question remained.

Could she do it?

Few in the massing crowd saw a tiny splash of doubt rippling through her topaz gaze--a squint, a blink, and it was gone.

No lesser President, Madame Lion was well-versed in animal protocol, and she was ready.

The Silence Ceremony

The Presidential eye continued its impassive survey of the creatures filling the sky above, the valley below. Sun continued to light the lioness like a beacon whose gleaming presence atop the craggy peak signaled to the animals that the Ceremony was about to begin. Looking her way, one creature after the other became transfixed by the still, golden being on the cliff.

Moving her head almost imperceptibly in a clock-wise motion, the lioness subtly finessed Sun's fingers into crowning her with a brighter and brighter glow, all the while fixing her shining eyes on the assemblage, sending a wordless message of Light into every creature, one at a time and all at once. In return, the animals--from the serpentine snake to the enigmatic iguana, the glinting weasel to the clattering quail, the blinkered mole-rat to the sky-borne hawk, the flashing whale, sleek-haired alpaca, fleet-footed mustang, hard-muscled wildebeest, humpty-backed camel--oh, ALL the animals of WEarth sent the luminous message back to the radiant beast on high, their animal-power altering its flow, changing its direction, causing the lioness to swirl her head now in a counter-clockwise motion, sending the energy up, up, up, up until Sun herself was caught in its pulsing current.

This, the moment of Power, was the moment of danger.

If any animal, but especially the central one, became unlinked and the flow broken, mighty forces could escape uncontrolled, causing upheavals and energy-errors entirely ruinous to WEarth and all its inhabitants.

The lioness, strained and stressed, was pushed to her limit. Nothing--not the most trying chase, the most strenuous mating, the most extended birthing--had ever been like this. But the discipline of the hunt, where every breath, muscle, nerve, and twitch was under strict control for as long as it took, held her in good stead.

She held her stillness close, and the shimmering current from Sun to lion to animals and back again flowed clean and pure and perfect, smoothing away all jagged edges of doubt and demurral. In an exquisite triune of heart, mind and soul, the lioness gave herself to this moment of unity.

Then even the young creatures felt something rise in their blood, causing them to move and sway with the rest in a way subtle and liquid and strong. The Waters and Winds responded to the massive animal motion by slowing down and smoothing out into a hush like a great deep breath, a song with no notes or tones but rhythm nonetheless, transporting the Great Silence in ripples and waves. Fires everywhere ceased their cackle and roar and became invisible once again, disappearing into earth and air as if they had never been. The noise and smoke of ages cleared, and now, within the ritual perimeter, the animals could not only hear themselves think, they

could hear the minds of others as well. The quietude was clear, permeable, crystalline, and entirely complete.

Spent, Sun withdrew. But, curiosity overcoming lassitude, she maneuvered around to a favorable vantage point in the east to hover above, watching, waiting, listening. Moon stood attentively on the western horizon, his white face intent upon the scene below. Even the Sisters fell quiet, clasping and holding their busy fingers tightly together to keep them still. And as the Winds went, so followed the Waters, and vice versa, each reflecting a growing stillness one upon the other. All Stars present reluctantly receded as liquid blue filled the great bowl of the sky-- this was an earth matter; there was nothing they could do.

Then, with everyone settled--all Powers great and small, all animals Wild and Halfwild-- the First Meeting of WEarth Cycle CCCXCVI came to order.

Order Comes to the Meeting

In the silence, each creature listened raptly as the deep voice of Madame Lion resonated to the farthest reaches of WEarth.

"Once upon a time," she began, "there were no Domesticates, nor were there any Wilds. We were Beasts alike, free to move where the food took us. All animals followed Wild Ways, eating according to needs, keeping Co-species pacts intact, honoring each other in life as in death.

"But when the two-leggeds known as Who-Mans left Wild Earth, certain four-leggeds followed them, giving up Wild status in exchange for food and ease of mind, becoming forever Domesticated and forever changed. They separated themselves from the rules and protocols of WEarth, and, perhaps unwittingly, began their collaboration with the Who-Mans in creating Rectangular World, a realm that continues to expand and infringe upon our homelands and autonomy.

"The animals have been irretrievably divided--now we have Wilds on the one hand (or hoof, or paw), Domesticates on the other, and Halfwilds with a foot (or fin, or claw) in both realms.

"Traditionally, Wilds have been patient and generous with Domesticates, or Doms as we know them; forgetting much, forgiving more. In spite of their Rect-World connections, we let them return to WEarth for meetings--and while the strictures of domesticity limit participation, a few Doms always manage to join the meetings where their numbers are tolerated if not always welcomed."

The lioness hesitated for a moment, as if an errant thought had snagged her speech. "To be fair, I must say that some Doms have extraordinary gifts--perhaps some of you remember the small creatures with the odd poofy coats--poogles?...no...poodles!...that was it--whose jumping tricks and tales of the "Big Top" so amused us during the last cycle. Of course, not all their stories were so amusing...to think of my lion-kin forced to jump through fire at the snap of a whip... frightful...frightful..."

Pausing, the lioness shook her head as if to clear it of all small leaping dogs and lions. "Indeed, the poodle-tale is simply more evidence that as problems worsen in WEarth, Dom-distractions no longer entertain. Many Wilds have registered complaints regarding the lack of discipline in the Dom ranks--noise, strange food, messes left behind, piles of ugly things that blow about and refuse their rightful return into WEarth's welcoming soils...it seems we in WEarth become more and more enmeshed in their tangled webs."

Concluding her complaints, Madame Lion stated, "It is ever more incumbent upon us to address WEarth's accelerating disappearances. First, however, we must frame a Wild response to the growing Dom-disturbances. Therefore let Meeting One of Cycle CCCXCVI come to order, wherein all present will consider banning Domesticates from WEarth meetings, now and forevermore. I open the meeting to comments."

**The Animals Speak:
The Domesticate Ban is Debated**

At the end of her speech, the animals erupted--all intent on having their say. Refusing to acknowledge any of them until order reigned once more, she then raised her paw and pointed first to the Bird Group, who reported a consensus of opinion within their ranks regarding the Domesticate issue.

"Keep! them aWAY! Keep! them aWAY! Keep! them aWAY!"

Rabbit Clans United disagreed. "I think, we think, that is, the entire RCU believes that they, the Doms, um, Domesticates that is, could be part of...um...not the problem but the...uh...you know..." and here a companion lifted the speaker's ear for a whispery, nose-twitching consultation, "part of THE SOLUTION!" finished the Spokes-rabbit triumphantly.

"Foolish rabbit!" Alpha Wolf bit his words off sharp and clean. "Save your bunny breath. You are too close to Dom-status yourself to see that the ones you so revere"--here his words fairly oozed past grimacing, gleaming canines--"haven't a problem-solving bone in their bodies."

"And who would know those bones better than you?" retorted Mother Buffalo, shaking her massive head at the wolves. "If Brother Wolf will kindly yield the field, let me point out that Doms CAN be quite clever and COULD possibly help orchestrate their own liberation, as Friend Rabbit was trying to say. It so happens that my son has carefully studied this matter and is pleased now to address the issue," she announced proudly, nudging the huge beast who stood beside her, flank to flank .

Although the youngster was equal to or even larger than his mother, her gentle shove nearly knocked him hoof over wattle. But with youthful grace he turned his stumble into an ebullient two-step, exuberantly exclaiming, "Mother knows best! Better than any wolf ever could!"

Alpha Wolf, fur bristling, warned, "Take care, young bullheaded mooncalf!"

"Sticks and stones..." the young bull retorted, but before he could finish this clever rejoinder he found himself recovering from yet another motherly shove, this one a touch more jarring than the first. Taking his mother's subtle hint, he turned away from the wolves and held his handsome head high, asserting, "Truly, I am well-acquainted with bovines--cows and heifers mostly, smart and good-looking animals--not so different from us!

"I've never met a bull, not that I'd want to, but the funny thing is, neither have any of the cows! They tell me bull-power is feared in Rect-world, so feared that male-bovines are kept hidden and not even let out for mating rituals. Instead their manly secretions are taken and stored in sacred tubes, and when it comes time for mating, a Who-Man uses his arm instead of

the bull's lengthy member and inserts the contents of the tubes into the mating chamber of the cow himself..."

A massive gasp of disbelief ran through the crowd of animals. Who-Mans usurping bull-power? Had the young beast been buffaloed by the bovines?

"Oh, that's only one of the labyrinthine goings-on in Rect-World--why, you wouldn't believe the mad tales! Only yesterday one of the heifers, the brown eyed one," the young creature cocked his great head and fixed dreamy eyes on the far horizon, "...the brown-eyed one heifer with such neat slender ankles...and breath sweet as a summer's day...well, she was telling me..."

"Enough of your silly tales!" interrupted a lengthy member of the Snake Consortium. "We susspect your bullishness rises from a fatal bovine attraction, and you will soon lose your idealism along with your foolish hide."

At this ominous insinuation, Mother Buffalo lowered her head and turned a glaring eye toward the forward beast. But apart from a twitch running down her spine, she made no move toward the hissy creature.

"You'd besst beware, my callow friend," continued the nerveless snake. "Give those big-eyed beasts a wide berth, for if contact with them does not kill you, it will make you weak. Examine your own hisstory if you doubt my words. "

"Oh, what is UP with the snaky threats? Anyone with an un-forked tongue knows that cows are nothing, NOTHING compared to dogs!" shrilled a sharp-nosed fox, her anger drowning out the snake's rattle of annoyance. "Dogs, the barking FOOLS--they began this whole mess!" she sniffed, a tremor of disgust shaking her attractive coat of russet fur. "Chasing a free lunch out of WEarth straight into the arms of Who-Mans, following them around like, well, like DOGS...doing whatever they're told, no matter how CRAZY...and what do they have to show for it? Bodies no self-respecting Wild canine would be caught DEAD with, and the brains of one of my day-old pups!" Red-Fox was beside herself with frustration.

"EEEYes! EEEYes!" screeched a chimpanzee, jumping up and down in agreement. "But not just dogs! It's all the pets! Inept kept creatures remembering nothing of ancient pacts or ties to clan and kin...animals who would betray their own kind at the drop of a banana skin!"

"Hah! Spoken like one who is all too intimate with the tenets of betrayal!" cried another chimp angrily, whose healing bruises on back and shoulder were grim evidence of a former chimp-clan battle.

At these ugly words, a massive hominid screeching broke out, subsiding only when an even greater roar emanated from Madame President. "Watch yourselves, or you will be banned from the Meeting along with the Domesticates!" she admonished the chastened chimps. "And you, Mr.

Snake, stop your rattling and move away from Red-Fox! Now!"

Madame Lion ran a tight meeting and would brook no nonsense.

"With all due respect, Madame, shall we return to the matter at hand?" suggested a member of the President's own extended family. "In my considered opinion," continued the young lion, "Domesticates are privy to information inaccessible to Wilds. Perhaps their insider status could be helpful."

"Well, excu-u-u-use me!" quoth a raven, full of scorn. "What star did you ride in on, Mr. King of the Savannah? Domesticates couldn't help anyone out of a paper bag. Or plastic!"

Dignity ruffled, the young lion-lord bared his manly yellow teeth and rumbled low in his throat while framing a properly scathing reply to Raven's rudeness.

In the meantime a roiling fountain of angry bubbles broke through the surface of the river like a volcano.

Through the bursting froth came the words "R-r-raven is r-r-right!"--a rippling response that marked the surprisingly unified consensus of the School of Finned Vertebrates pooling their knowledge at the mouth of the river. "Dom-om-oms must never-ever-ever be allowed-owed-owed to muddy-uddy-uddy our water-ater-aters!"

"Hmmmph. What do fish know?" creaked an ancient tortoise, ever ready with a word of wisdom, or two. "How clear are the waters where Orcas break ancient species-pacts, attacking whales and otters?"

"Orcas are not fish-ish-ish!" objected the Finned Vertebrates. "Why ask us about their strange way-ay-ays?"

"Hmmmph. Fish!" retorted the old-one. "Going with every flow, pulled this way and that way, that way and this. I, however, have traveled slowly, steadily, carefully through many circles of time, and have gained wisdom, much wisdom! Something fish will never do!"

His wisdom then dictated that he heave his huge heavy body up to the Speaker's Rock, the better for his audience to hear his long-awaited speech (long awaited, that is, by himself if no one else).

"Friends, Wilds, Domesticates, lend me your ears! Something is rotten in the state of WEarth!" Extending his ancient head as far up as it could go, he announced to the crowd, "To be, or not to be: that is the question!"

"In the reaches of the blue sky, in the depths of the azure sea, on mountain and plain, in river and lake, in soil and sand, many have come, many have gone! Yes, during my long and eventful lifespan, many have come, many have gone," continued the old sage, "but never like now, where from cloud to sea, from hill to valley, from stream to delta, on island and beach, in reef and rain-forest, animals lose homes, families, even their senses!"

"The horror! The horror!"

Turning back to the fish, he challenged, "Remember, no animal is an island! You are not fish alone! Mind all who inhabit your watery world or you will suffer for your ignorance!"

"Ignorance, shmignorance!" sallied the fish.

"Lord, what fools these fishes be," the wise-one returned.

"No fool-ool-ool like an old fool-ool-ool," lobbed back the fish.

The tortoise was prepared. "Frailty, thy name is fish."

"Ra-aced any rabbit-abbits lately?" A slamming blow from the fins.

The tortoise rallied. "Get thee to a fishery!"

The water-bound wonders went deep. "Go...go lay an egg-gg-gg!"

But they had met their match.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless fish..." Tortoise smashed back.

"Old one! Beware of disregarding the advice of fish!" This crashing and entirely unexpected defense nearly knocked the tortoise off his rock. "You and all the rest--listen to Friend Salmon, from whom I have learned much! We Wilds are not the problem," continued the great gravelly-voiced grizzly, "it is the fault of the weak, falsely fattened Domesticates. They invade our territory, delivering sickness and destruction to all the Wilds. The least we can do is keep them from trashing our meetings."

"Agreed, Mother Bear, but be careful where you cast your stones," boomed a big-antlered elk. "Didn't I see your daughters at the dump last week, eating like pigs?"

And so it went, weedy seeds of argument cast back and forth, round and round, up and down, falling on ever more disturbed ground. Several altercations between Domesticates and Wilds contributed to the chaos, causing Madame Lion to call a halt to the proceedings. Directing the animals to meditate on what had transpired, she noted that the Domesticate Ban would be number one on the agenda of Meeting Number Two.

The Second Meeting

Madame President spoke softly, distinctly, metaphorically.

"It seems that the seeds of dissent have borne bitter fruit. WEarth is ever more overgrown with rank and tainted plants. We are here to decide if we can any longer brook such infestations. I call for position reports on the Domesticate Ban."

Alpha Wolf, whose clan had extensive knowledge of the in and outs of life alongside Domesticates, stepped up to the Speaker's Rock.

"During the First Meeting, several Cessation of Aggression Pacts (COAPs) were violated by both Wild and Domesticate. This may be the last straw," he stated, fur standing on end from the intensity of his words.

"As all Wilds know, in COAP protocols, the order of the day dictates that animals bely their battles and hungers--the better to serve the greater good with. Most important is the 'Tempting Fate' clause which clearly states that the wolf shall not dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall not lie down with the kid, the calf and the young lion must stay apart for good and all. Yet during the last meeting, lambs wandered willy-nilly into Wolf Territory and calves roamed near the Lions' Lair. However, their witless mothers lacked effective strategies to keep their young in check and as a result, not only did Doms put their own kind in danger, they caused certain immature Wilds, a few young lions and wolves in particular, to break protocols. Injuries to both Wilds and Domesticates occurred, and two lambs died. This is unacceptable.

"As all Wilds know, the tenets of COAP are specialized rules, not usually in force because a constant diet of restraint leaves something to be desired, and imbalances of desire can destabilize WEarth populations. However, COAPs are prescribed during meetings because large and complex gatherings call for extreme measures such as these.

"But such subtleties are lost on Domesticates. Doms believe WEarth to be a place without controls, a place to do what they please when they please. They think because Wilds live without the external constraints of Rect-World that we are "free." They have no comprehension of the interwoven constraints that rule our lives and behaviors. But even if they understood the fine points of WEarth protocols, it would not matter--Domesticates have been under the influence of external orders for so long they lack the ability to regulate themselves.

"Wilds must take some blame for indulging Dom-foolery in the past, but now such ignorance takes on intolerable weight. Domesticates have been away from WEarth too long."

A number of pigs had made their way from Rect-World to attend this important meeting. Remaining downcast during Wolf's speech, as the flow of his damning words came to an end they began to jump and squeal.

"Madame President! We come on behalf of all Domesticates to pledge our cooperation. Oh, please, please, please, please, PLEASE do not deprive us of our only remaining connection to WEarth. We and all Domesticates have a deep dream that someday we will return to WEarth to find liberty, equality, fraternity..."

Madame President replied only, "Your liberties will destroy us all."

"But is it not true that all animals are created equal?" cried the frustrated pigs.

"Perhaps once, but no longer. Domesticates codes have been tampered with for so long that Doms are no longer the animals they once were."

The pigs grunted in dismay. "Are you saying that some animals are more equal than others?"

"No!" answered the lioness impatiently. "Equality is irrelevant. Domesticates are simply no longer suited for autonomous lives, no longer suited for survival in WEarth."

"But wait! You must listen..." begged the desperate pigs.

"NO MERE PIG," roared the now angry President, "tells a lioness what to do! The time for listening is over!"

Dismissing the pigs with an ominous sweep of glistening claws, she announced, "I call for motions regarding the Domesticate Ban."

Panther and Great Horned Owl, both long-time advocates of a Domesticate Ban, nearly got into a fracas in their eagerness to make the first motion. Panther, however, was distracted by certain mesmerizing rhythms caused by short pink legs scrambling as fast as they could go to the outer limits of the gathering. Owl took advantage of Panther's preoccupation with the running pigs to fairly hoot, "I move that all Domesticates be banned from WEarth Meetings, now and forevermore!" His motion was quickly seconded by the smugly satisfied Snake Consortium, more than pleased with the excellent progress of Meeting Two.

From far away, wide-eyed pigs watched as the golden path of dreams closed to them forever. Panther, annoyed at being bested by a lone owl and a rabble of snakes, cast a long, dark eye on the hapless pigs and wondered when the COAP Protocols would be lifted so he could let the plump creatures feel his pain.

At the same time, Bear Nation made a motion that Halfwilds be allowed to stay at Meetings, seconded by the Deer Populace. The motions passed virtually unanimously, and the final WEarth proclamation states the following:

WEarth Rules for Domesticates:

ONE: Stay away.

TWO: Wilds are not responsible for the fate of those who break rule one.

WEarth Rules for Halfwilds:

ONE: No petty distractions during meetings

(ie. no gulls screeching about the problems involved in getting food out of garbage cans, no squirrel-complaints about real-estate, etc.)

TWO: All animals must eat in Wild fashion

(Pigeons, Rats, etc. must not bring Rect-World foods to meetings. Bears risk demotion to Halfwild status if they break this rule.)

THREE: NO Wild or Halfwild may speak of any meeting in the presence of Domesticates or while in Rect-World. Breaking this rule means prohibition from meetings.

FOUR: Halfwilds, due to their proximity to Rect-World, may be allowed to make occasional reports through appropriate channels about conditions and changes in that troubled and expanding region.

When the new protocols were decided upon, Madame Lion called to the pigs who were slinking away from the ritual perimeter back to their grim, circumscribed lives. "Take note, yon pigs! You are charged with informing your Rect-World companions that Wild and Domesticate paths must now separate for good and all."

Then pulling her fierce gaze away from the cowering creatures, she led the crowd in ratifying the Domesticate Ban. Making their Animal-Vows, rats, mice, pigeons, squirrels, etc., officially added their numbers and attitudes to the meetings, and any beleaguered Doms still present returned with the pigs to Rect-World, dispatching without delay the news of the their ban from WEarth.

**The Third Meeting:
Wherein the Accelerating Disappearances are Addressed,
and a Decision is Made.**

Third Meetings are special. In every WEarth Cycle, things change as a result of third meetings. There is even a special Presidential salutation, the Triune-Tetrad Testament, (or T to the Third Power as it is commonly known) to mark this momentous occasion.

During Cycle CCCXCVI, Madame Lion sat quietly on the Speaker's Rock, beaming down on the congress of animals like a golden flame, waiting for the proper moment. When the crowd had settled and anticipation ran through the animals like an electric current, she spoke the words that would focus their energy and yield the Power of the Third:

May the flow between our minds be a spring river
making the world fertile
then refinding its own way.

May ideas build one upon another
like the summer-soft loam feeding
season after season of flower and fern.

May our merging thoughts beget a form
lucid as the seed of autumn,
holding life, a covenant in its heart.

May our minds be ever open to the winter sky,
to the end, the beginning, the paradox,
the wisdom of dormancy,
and the power that lies within.

May the magnet of our desire attract Abundance
to dwell now and forevermore
within our Sacred Sphere.

This we ask for One.

This we ask for All.

The animals heard her words and repeated them in their own tongues, creating a cacophony that spread in waves well over the face of the earth and up into the lair of the stars, who sought (and failed) once again to capture its quicksilver power.

When the last ringing echo had receded, Madame Lion resumed.

"We Animals of WEarth know that many creatures no longer quicken our Mother's fair body, no longer multiply within her manifold flesh, no longer add their stories to her eternal tale. This, the Third Meeting, will address these Disappearances and Their Acceleration (DATA). For the purpose of properly approaching the DATA, I call upon the services of Grey Elephant, Story-Keeper for Cycle CCCXCVI."

A shiver of anticipation rippled through the congress of animals. A Storykeeper! Truly this would be a meeting to remember!

At the beginning of every cycle, the animals choose not only a President but also a Storykeeper, although more times than not the latter is never called upon. Indeed, many cycles come and go without any assistance from the Storykeeper, leaving meetings to be remembered or not, as is each animal's wont.

But Madame Lion's decision to enlist Grey Elephant's services meant that all of this cycle's events would be remembered, coded and stored in the WEarth Reservoir of Knowledge, the WROK, upon which all animal life is built and sustained. All happenings during this meeting would become an integral part of the animals' past, present and future.

"Let me introduce to you the Storykeeper of Cycle CCCXCVI, who is Grey Elephant, a most excellent animal. He will fulfill his obligations admirably, and will, I predict, be the best Storykeeper ever to grace our beautiful WEarth," said Madame Lion. These were no idle words--there was in fact great weight behind them. Compared with former Storykeepers in former cycles, Grey Elephant was a beau ideal--not in looks, perhaps, (although his mates might argue that point) but regarding his memory.

All animal-memories are like rivers; our current Storykeeper's being a rich, wide, winding flow from past to future that picks up everything and carries it along, depositing loads of animal lore on shores where growth and life thrive in its fertile mulch. The elephant's memory is large, comprehensive and accessible--attributes appreciated by Wilds who have learned from long and sometimes bitter experience that while the equality of animals may be debatable, the inequality of memories is beyond dispute.

Just return for a moment to the reign of Saber-Tooth Tiger (a painful journey for some) whose powers of persuasion were such that he convinced the animals to name him both President and Storykeeper. Tiger's memory ran through his mind like a cataract--fast, narrow, deep and full of dangerous whirlpools that swallowed up stories and left them spinning with no beginning nor any end. But during his cycle, large animals (far outweighing even Grey Elephant) ruled, and they considered Saber-Tooth to be a fine leader for such fine times. Tiger

demanded the big picture, and during his cycle big stories were told and even bigger decisions were made--sweeping decisions that dispensed with details not worth hearing, much less worth remembering.

His Bigness had no patience for small animals and their turf reports. When one of these lesser creatures dared to speak about weather-changes, trees migrating to new home grounds, rivers forming new paths, or any of the daily details that together form the patterns of life in WEarth, Tiger would roar "Insignificant!" And after a few swats from a claw-studded Presidential limb, the hapless animals learned to keep their own council.

But a plethora of grandeur cannot make up for a dearth of wisdom, and Tiger's rule ultimately led to a period of grave crisis for many animals, especially the big ones. Indeed, Saber-Tooth Tiger and all his mammoth companions now reign in memory rather than reality.

Sadly, such are the dangers of a Storykeeper with such a memory.

On the other hand, omniscience isn't everything. One has only think of Blue Whale, with a memory broad enough to contain both past and future, to know this is true. In the whale-mind all things--their watery home, familial relationships and communications--are made of resonating patterns and wave-like phenomena, common territory to both sea creatures and birds. Land animals also communicate through seismic messages, but trying to maneuver within the whale's multi-dimensional mazes wore new grooves in many an animal head. All agreed that while Blue's vibrations were good, they were a bit mind-blowing to those without wings or fins.

Certain birds took it upon themselves to translate for their land-locked fellows, puffing up their breasts and singing Blue-notes as if there were no tomorrow. Swallows wove in and out of whale-songs so intricate that (if one is to believe the tales) they flew into other dimensions, at times becoming invisible. Certain creatures, lemmings for example, were so taken by this new song that they left familiar land paths to brave the deep waters, grooving along with their brothers and sisters in the cool blue beckoning waves until the sea claimed them.

With Whale in charge of remembering, everyone sang the blues!

But it is safe to say that elephants are less prone to imaginative flights than the more mobile whales in their fanciful environments. Gravity-bound, big-footed lives have made elephants practical beings who espouse plain-dealing, fairness to all, accuracy and attention to detail. They also maintain (whenever elephantly possible) a deep reverence for the fine art of storytelling, whether through the drum beat of their nimble feet, or through their many and varied voices. Madame President was not exaggerating when she predicted our big-eared, grey-

skinned Elephant to be a fine Storykeeper, perhaps the finest ever. But then, such times call for such an animal.

The Elephant Remembers

Grey Elephant raised his great trunk in tribute to all present, and said in his resonating voice, "Greetings, fellow creatures. Let me say first that in my efforts to report in full on the Meetings of this cycle, I will welcome any additions or corrections to my Rememberings." Of course never before had Elephant faltered in his recollections, but, humble as he was huge, he did not flaunt that fact.

He cleared his great throat, a deep and reverberating sound that absorbed and smoothed away all noise in the audience. "Let me now recount to you the Moments of previous Meetings One and Two, wherein the Domesticate Ban was debated, accepted and recorded. Bird Nation was the first to speak: "KEEP! them aWAY...."

"Ahem," came a polite growl from Madame Lion. "Mr. Storykeeper, let us move along. The Domesticate Ban distracted us from vital issues, so let us dispense with the Moments in favor of addressing the business at hand."

"Why, of course, Madame President," responded the startled elephant. Sadly cognizant of changes taking place, he thought back to past meetings that had been more like celebrations, permeated with the rich, nutty flavor of forever, with animals telling new tales and improving old ones until Sun and Moon, attracted by their mutual joy and delight, edged toward each other to finally meet...and merge...Moon, waxing full and taut, moving his cool silver body over his hot lover Sun...she in turn embracing him in a pulsing golden halo of light...the two sky-creatures mingling...joining together in a ritual of sky-mating effectively halting the Wild stories in a blaze of glory...creatures running home in a shadowy land, taking care not to look up at the two heavenly partners together in ecstatic union...

Elephant, jolting himself out of his reverie to face the demands of an ever-diminishing present, stated simply, "The Dolphin Pod has prepared an opening statement--all Wilds and Half-Wilds please direct your attention to the Seven Sisters."

Thus Spake the Dolphins

Seven dolphins broke the water's surface in perfect unison. And while they took turns speaking, yet they spoke in one voice.

"We have carefully researched the DATA in an effort to reveal the core issues, which we now understand to be the breaching of ancient WEarth taboos, resulting in diminishment and destruction of ancestral territories, and the disappearance of numerous Wild populations.

"We are pleased to explain.

"From birth to mating to death, all life revolves around balances in flux; any perfectly balanced linearity is sterile and static and will not hold. Every Wild creature honors both the Laws of Symmetry and the congruent Laws of Broken Symmetry laid down at the Beginning, all of which are the same and not the same.

"One of the Laws of Broken Symmetry, featuring the Right Angle Taboo, clearly states that uncontrolled proliferation of rectangles inhibits the subtle deviations necessary to perpetuate the revolutions of infinity. Pi is key to these Dimensional Permutations, but--and this is a critical point--the parallel and opposing linear relationships within rectangles leave Pi open and unfixed, thus circumscribing the the proper unfolding of the Temporal Spiral."

The audience fixed its multitude of eyes and ears on the seven sleek sisters and nodded in unison. Of course, few of them comprehended the sterility of perfectly balanced linearities, or the importance of the proper unfolding of the Temporal Spiral--Wilds think what they think and do what they do because mostly, well, because it just seems best that way. But the dolphins' message entered them as music--a euphonic song, a melody weaving together heart and mind that would play again and again in every Wild mind until its uncanny tune was as familiar as the sweet smell of home.

"Without the Spiral's tempering curves," continued the Seven Sisters, "Future, youngest and least wise progeny of Time, throws off bonds to Past and Present, speeding ahead in great leaping linear strides, stretching straight and thin as the horizon is breached.

"The drive of his pointed path causes Abundance, who functions best within the firm and fitting placement of Now, to be pierced and pulled asunder. Her profound roundness cracks and quakes. Torn and shattered, she makes preparations to leave the Sacred Sphere lest Future's unsettling movements cause her to turn in upon herself, creating catastrophic and universal temporal splits. Until Future returns to a more fitting place and pace, Abundance will continue these dire preparations to flee, gathering together more and more earthly fragments to take with her as she goes. We and others of the Sea Mammal Consortium may depart with her. Many whales and dolphins have left already.

"For what Abundance leaves behind will not long sustain us."

Their speech over, the seven sisters executed in perfect unison a curving leap backwards into the still blue water. The animals were awed by the Sister's performance, but even the most dumbstruck among their numbers deduced one thing from the Dolphins' speech: things were getting worse.

"Thank you, Sister Dolphins, for your succinct summation of the DATA," said Madame President graciously. "Mr. Elephant, who will be the first to report on Conditions?"

"Madame President, that would be the Long-Arms. We will now hear from Man-Monkey, representing the Tree-Top Clan of Long-Arm Research Division Two in the Ape and Monkey Association (AaMA).

Man-Monkey's Tale

A lithe and well-groomed monkey eloquently swung down from his high perch. In a voice clear and piercing, he stated the results of the Long-Arms' long-term DATA project, entitled "Vested Interest in Reducing Unnecessary Suffering (VIRUS).

"I bring fond greetings from the Tree Top Clan to my fellow creatures, but little in the way of good news," he began. These inauspicious words were not lost on the crowd--even the youngest Wilds quit their games to listen to the handsome primate with the large and piercing eyes. "We have borne many messages to the Who-Mans, but the results of these sendings have been mixed, at best.

"As you know, long ago Who-Mans were known as the Two-Legged Clan, living in the Green Realm of the Sheltering Father and following Wild ways like the rest of the creatures. But unlike Four-Leggeds who are constantly reminded of the ground from which they sprang, the more upright the Two-Leggeds became, the more they lost sight of their roots. Forward-looking, they felt trapped within the endless cycle of seasons and saw the Rooted Ones as bars in a prison rather than as the green protection of the Father's arms. Frustrated, they decided to follow a line out of the ever-revolving present to wherever their restless feet might take them.

"We warned them of dangers ahead, and when they said things like 'Eat my dust' or 'Evolution, not revolution' in their odd jesting way, little did we guess that those would be their last coherent words! But a strange metamorphosis occurred when the Two-Leggeds changed their name to 'Who-Man' to mark their quest--they began to call Wilds by strange names as if WE and not they had changed. Now the Who-Mans have forgotten that all creatures understood

one another, once upon a time.

“But before leaving the Green Realm, they did one wise thing: they asked the Sheltering Father to bless their journey. This he agreed to do if they in turn vowed to honor his brethren, the Rooted Ones--to respect their autonomy, to cut their flesh only when necessary, and then with proper care and ceremony.

“When the Who-Mans shared the Father’s fruits during a special last meal in WEarth, he said to them, ‘Set aside special groves for an annual renewal of vows and connections to the Green Realm, for this fertile place is the ever-changing expression of my soul. Remember always to follow the sacred laws which dictate that for everything taken in, an equal or greater amount must be given out to continue the cycles of Abundance. By honoring your vows and performing proper rituals, you shall continue to have access to the vast caches of WEarth-knowledge, the WROK, within the Green Realm.’

“The Who-Mans made their vows, and in return received the blessing of the Sheltering Father and many gifts, including a share of his seeds. While some in WEarth thought this generous to a fault, the Father was doing no more and no less than what he thought best. Taking their gifts from WEarth, the Who-Mans then left to begin the long and ponderous process of establishing a new realm.

“Bent on severing ties with their cyclical past, Who-Mans ruled that the 360-degree linearity be divided and conquered, that their realm be built primarily of 180 and ninety-degree forms, with the great wheel of life, the eternal circle, subjugated for service. These laws resulted in the erection of what we now know as Rectangular-World, or Rect-World, as we call it.

“In Rect-World, with its new languages and new lines, distortion and misinterpretation were inevitable. The Who-Mans used, and still use the Father’s gifts to great effect, but many controvert the rules of Abundance by taking his generosity not as a benevolence but as a birthright--theirs to hold and keep, world without end, amen. Rect-World is filled with gifts from the Father, but by taking them in and restricting their outward flow, Who-Mans and Rect-World expand and swell to monstrous proportions.

“Believing excessive increase to be growth, and mistaking size for power, many Who-Mans now consider the Green Realm irrelevant, and their vows unnecessarily constraining. They no longer comprehend, much less honor the autonomy of the Rooted Ones, large or small. Most of the Green Realm has been disturbed, distorted or destroyed, and ancient trees continue to be removed from ancestral groves without ceremony, their flesh cut, burned or taken away and kept from renewing the land which gave them life. Many Wild homelands are destroyed, and the Green Realm fills with fire and smoke, stifling the Father’s soothing breath as he retreats into

ever smaller islands of refuge.

“As connections to the Green Realm diminish, Who-Mans forget their place. As they defile and imprison the Rooted Ones in rows, they themselves become entirely unrooted.

“They lose a father yet gain a master, for Time and his kin lead them now. No good parent he, Time measures but does not teach. Yet Who-Mans follow like artless children, heedless of his dangerous twists and turns. Still, they might learn from Time’s most gentle relative, wide-bodied Sister Past, for within the complexities of her rhythms and whirls, she reveals the art of moving harmoniously within paradox and spin. But Who-Mans, too enamored of speed to bother with her slow and intricate steps, tear away from her dance, and worse, break free from Present to be caught up and polarized within the grip of Future who, lean as a line, leads away from and never toward.”

Here Man-Monkey heaved a long, keening sigh. The Storykeeper took this moment to say, “Remember, Man-Monkey, as noted before by Madame President, we, too, are subject to Time’s ever-present demands. Please move quickly toward your final point.”

Man-Monkey, a master storyteller of some renown, let his mouth fall open in shock. Truly, WEarth was in dangerous shape if animals must get to the point. In a more generous past, he might have taken a moment to berate Grey Elephant for ruining his timing, but perhaps the great beast was right, perhaps he must hurry before all was lost...

With the agility of his kind, he quickly regained composure, and said quietly, “Thank you, Friend Elephant, for your timely reminder.

“To continue my tale...hmmm, where was I...

“Oh, yes...Future, yes...the demands of Future...

“Always hungry, never satisfied, Future requires continual feeding. For his benefit, Who-Mans have made ‘Time-Savers’ which we know as ‘Time-Eaters’--creatures who cut up Present, piece by piece, to feed to Future, to satisfy his ever-empty maw. Time-Eaters, large and small, evolve daily at their tasks, yet they have no souls to temper their expanding powers. Quicker, faster, louder, they invade--chopping, cutting, feeding all to Future who eats and eats and grows ever more thin. Present now is nearly gone, and even Sister Past’s huge and generous body is cannibalized.

“Who-Mans and their Time-Eaters seem so bent on feeding all to Future that soon there will be nothing left for him to consume. Indeed, my own Wild kin are numbering less and less as our WEarth homelands disappear. Who-Mans have always considered my people harbingers of their own Two-Legged past, but those of us still alive bring them messages not from long ago but from what lies ahead.

“Let me explain.

"Who-Mans are bereft of covering--a shocking phenomena, we can all agree, and one they handle with ill grace. Obsessed with their fur-less bodies, they continually fuss and experiment with various wrappings, none of which can compare with the beauty and comfort of even my own fine dark fur. Indeed, many Wilds pay the ultimate price for the Who-Mans' cruel envy of our coats of many colors.

"But coverings are only one problem--another Who-Man obsession is to continually peer at, into and beneath their skin for answers which could easily be found elsewhere were they only to look. But during the last cycle, the Ape and Monkey Association took advantage of this peculiar shortsightedness, and of our cousin-status, to send messages from our bodies to theirs containing codes to be used to unbind the enslaving grip of Future. Who-Mans must cast away their shackles and follow the AaMA codes back into the spiral of connections that still link them to the Green Realm. The Sheltering Father waits to heal them--he calls to them in his many voices.

"But the noise of Future, busily devouring the Green Realm bit by bit, obscures the Sheltering Father's voice. Who-Mans must struggle to hear beyond the all-consuming cacophony of Time-Eaters; they must fight, within and without their bodies, to repent the curve of Now. But instead, they dither, they argue, they die, never comprehending where the answers lie.

"And worse, the Long-Arm Clans are prodded and probed for solutions not within us. Our closeness to Who-Mans has always been a double-edged sword but never more than now when we are sacrificed on the cutting-edge of their quest. While the AaMA feared this outcome, we hoped Who-Mans would see beyond their own skin, and ours.

"Our plan fails, and we suffer for it."

The animals were silent as Man-Monkey's story ended. His final words spread throughout WEarth like a plume of unclean water.

"Thank you, Man-Monkey, for your report," said Madame President soberly. Grey Elephant then called for the next speaker, asking, "Who speaks for the Deer Populace?"

Deer-Buck's Report

At the Elephant's call, a sleek and big-antlered buck stepped out of his family group and greeted the crowd.

"We are in an unusual situation," Deer-Buck began, "because the Deer Populace is increasing. Who-Mans have not lost their impulse to partake of the traditions of the ancient hunt, and they perceive that killing us connects them with these protocols, thus they 'protect' our species. Yet few Who-Mans understand that the honored rituals of the hunt require them to look deeply into our Deer-Soul, to study it carefully and at length, for if they did, they would not deprive us of the company of our ancient WEarth-partner, Wolf.

"Wolf's demand for our flesh keeps us running straight and true on our chosen Wild path--yet we wax while our WEarth-partner wanes. Now, increases in deer-population have compelled us to reclaim original territories that now lay within Rect-World, and to search for new ones inside that difficult realm. We move into the green wastelands around Who-Man shelters because we sometimes find small oases where food still grows--delicious root crops, corn, beans, leafy greens--but the more we enter Who-Man territory, the more the Shiny Ones attack us."

Many animals shuddered at the mention of the Shiny-Ones, a Time-Eater species that hurtles its huge metallic bodies at animals, attacking with deadly force but torturous inaccuracy. Worse, Shiny-Ones have evolved methods of traveling off their hardened trails, invading animal homes on both land and water with noise and poisons, brutality and ruination.

Deer-Buck continued, "Since we are able, indeed, required to live near Who-Mans, we have used this proximity to transfer from our bodies to theirs a tiny hardbody whose bite weakens them. Assisted by Mouse Nation, we had hoped this project would keep Who-Mans from further invasions of our territory, but far from leaving our lands, they instead erect ever more massive shelters, dividing and destroying most of what remains of the Green Realm. In the process, they deprive many creatures of food and shelter by replacing rich plant-homelands with alien grasses kept impotent by fierce sharp-toothed, fuming Time-Eaters that bite off their seed-heads. Thus the Who-Man extends the toxic green spaces around their shelters until not a brave badger, a clever gopher, a humble mole, or even a tiny tick, can prosper there.

"If that were not enough, the Dom-dogs terrorize many of our Deer families. Last season three of them brought down a fawn belonging to one of my Doe's and would have killed the tiny creature had not his brave mother landed a blow upon the lead Canine that turned the whining cowards away.

"As Wolf will tell you, it is not Death we fear, for she is merely a pathway back into the

Green Realm, nor do we begrudge a true hunter his reward. Yet we fear these canines who do not understand the Taboo Regarding Unnecessary Termination or Harm (TRUTH). Dogs, recoded to maintain Who-Man-friendly puppy behaviors even when adults, kill not to appease hunger but to satisfy urges that they can neither understand nor control. And many Who-Man hunters are not unlike their canine companions in this regard.

“Our tick-plan to frighten away the Who-Mans has not succeeded,” Deer-Buck concluded, “for they invade the Green Realm with ever greater tenacity and destructiveness. We are at an impasse.”

The congress of animals let out a collective sigh. They knew the problems Deer-Buck described only too well!

Then, with a strange look in his eye, Grey Elephant said, “Let us now hear from the Frog Collective.”

Frog-Boy’s Tale

The sigh grew into an agitated rustle that swept through the crowd like a chill wind. The Frog delegation, which had designed a plan of radical import, was strangely small, and many of its members appeared damaged. Frog-Boy, missing part of a leg, hopped awkwardly to the central rock to speak, but while his body was less than perfect, his voice was strong.

“In spite of many and repeated warnings from many of you, frogs have long lived alongside Who-Mans, and nothing any of you can do or say will change that fact.” A rather defensive beginning, thought some, but frogs will be frogs. “The young Who-Mans are especially fascinated by us, by our beautiful colors and graceful movements, and in spite of personal harm--uncounted injuries and even deaths--the Frog-Collective long ago decided to take it as our special task to introduce new generations of Who-Mans to the Green Realm.

“Some in the Collective even believed frogs to be favored by Who-Mans above all other beasts...that they...perhaps, even loved us...” A multitude of snorts and hisses burst out of the audience, causing Frog-Boy to swallow his sentimental gush in a startled gulp.

“Fantassssy!” cried out an incensed member of the Snake Consortium. “Frogs have broken our Co-Species Pact, and we suffer great hungers because there are so few of you! Last week I was driven to eat a toad whose foul aftertaste lingers even as I speak...a bitter experience that foolish frogs could have prevented had they not...”

Madame President interrupted what promised to be a long rant, saying brusquely, “While

we commiserate with your digestive woes, Friend Snake, you must let Frog-Boy continue.”

The frog, buoyed by this unexpected Presidential support, proudly puffed up his throat until he was three times the frog he had been. “Call us foolish romantics, but our relationship with the Who-Mans was of profound significance!

“Or so we thought,” he added, deflating with a long sigh back down to a more diminutive size.

“You see, we entered the Who-Man’s lexicon. We became part of their stories passed down from generation to generation, tales rooted in greener days about creatures--fairy-folk and leprechauns and trolls and yes, frogs--who carried the powers that Two-Leggeds left behind when they became Who-Mans. Frogs became a conduit to the Green Realm, manifesting a message of faith in what lies unseen, that under our lumpy flesh lies a great and metamorphic beauty, that all Who-Mans needed to do was believe, believe in our green power, and to place their lips on our tender flesh....”

“Hah! They’ll eat you alive!” the wolves interrupted.

“Don’t be taken in by their welcome grin!” warned a skeptical crocodile.

“‘Happily ever after’ is a dead end!” called out the bears.

“Order!” Madame Lion demanded of the fractious crowd. “Let Frog-Boy speak!”

Shaken by the lioness’s roar and the anger of the other animals, Frog-Boy shrank into a tiny green spot on the great rock. But screwing his courage to the sticking place, he stuttered, “N-no, you...you...misunderstand! Belief in ‘happily ever-after’ is not responsible for our condition. We made the decision to code our young ones to stay unborn because we thought that Who-Mans would look around and wonder, ‘Where are all our green friends?’ As our presence was dear to them, so our disappearance would strike at their hearts.”

Frog-Boy’s throat bulged and beat with emotion. “The frogs who remain are in this sad shape as a warning!” The malformed leg which he had tucked under his body was now presented for all to see. “As the Frog Prince goes, so goes the Who-Man! We metamorphose not into beauty but into nothingness, and it will take more than kisses to bring us back.

“But we may have sacrificed in vain. Who-Mans seem not to care about our disappearance. Indeed, there are still frogs everywhere--made not of flesh and bone but of false cloth and stuffing--yet Who-Mans are not unhappy with these lifeless substitutes. Real frogs who are left wish to warn other Wilds: Survive at all costs! Do not follow our example!”

At the end of the frog’s lament, the Animals of WEarth loose a great cry of pain, sending it round and round the world, to every hidden place, to every ear. Did you hear it? Perhaps you did--it was a sunny day, a quiet day when the world was going about its business, and suddenly a great quaking and quivering shook the stillness, and shook and shook again.

What the Crow Knows

After the cry had echoed its last lament, Mr. Storykeeper asked, "Who else wishes to speak?"

A rackety tumult of wings announced the entrance of the entire Crow-Company as they flapped their way to the Speaker's Rock, forming a shimmering blanket of blue-black around the granite slab. They settled here, there and everywhere, all, that is, except one--a large, shiny fine-feathered bird who took her place at the highest point.

Receiving a nod from Grey Elephant, and more than ready to set others upon the proper path, the formidable bird began her speech. "Listen up!" she called out to the crowd of animals.

Of course, they had no choice but to listen up--as always with crows, her piercing call filled WEarth with its raucous power.

"Unlike lesser folk, crows do not beat around the bush!" Crow-Lady announced to the crowd. "Unlike lesser folk, crows are adaptable! Crows make do!"

Some animals took umbrage at her words--lesser folk, indeed! But what could you do with crows? Incurable creatures, crows.

"Because of our unusual flexibility, we were able to go straight to the source! Oh, yes! Crows moved into Rect-World to get the real story! And, let me add, not without sacrifice! The noise, the food, the plastic bags, the insects! Oh, how we suffer!

"Yet, in spite of ever-increasing danger and discomfort, we have seen through to the truth; we have comprehended the difference between reality and mirage, between reflection and narcissism. We have succeeded where others only fail!

"And the secret to Crow success? Well you may ask! And well may Crow-Lady tell you!" Her voice took on a darkly intimate tenor as she revealed the great crow-discovery.

"Windows!" she said, sending the word wafting out over the crowd where it would fall into each ear, clear, bell-like, transparent and perfectly understood. Such was the assumption of Crow-Lady, indeed, such were the assumptions of her kind.

Windows...Windows...Windows? The echo carried from one end of the crowd to the other as the animals reflected on Crow-Lady's meaning. Was she, once again, off on some off-beat, outlandish, insular, conceptual crow-tangent? Who could figure out the crow mind? Who would want to? Such were the assumptions of certain animals, more than once frustrated and perplexed by densely shaded and convoluted crow-talk.

Undaunted, indeed, undimmed by the crowd's less than enthusiastic response, Crow-Lady continued.

"Windows! Yes, windows! A bird's worst enemy! But crows have turned the tables--

they're on our side now."

Tables? Sides? Had crows had been too long in Rect-World?

Casting a sharp eye on the crowd of animals, the great bird declared, "Crows look through them!"

Hmmm?

"Oh, yes! Instead of flying into windows like other winged wonders, crows look through them. Brilliant, you say? Well, it took crows to crack that particular illusion..."

A soft insistent cooing emanated from the crowd, interrupting the bird's insistent litany. "Crow Lady, Crow Lady, with all due respect, does the word "pigeon" ring a bell? Pigeon? Are you not aware that pigeons were on windowsills before crows even knew Rect-World existed?"

"Precisely my point!" retorted the crow. The very idea! A pigeon questioning a crow! Of all the feather-brained nonsense! "Pigeons have been in Rect World so long they're blind as bats..."

With these words, a fluttery turbulence blackened the sky as a dark whirlwind of fearsome bat-ire rose above the animals' heads--up, up, up, and then swooping down, down, down as one bat after the next came less than a feathers-breadth away from the arrogant head bird before soaring up again.

But the fearless crow did not deign to duck. Much. "Settle down!" she called to the careening bats, her feathers fairly crackling with impatience. "Enough petty squabbles! Crow-Lady has important things to say!"

The bats took one final ominous loop and then retreated to hang by their toes in disgruntled but quiet resignation. Like the pigeons, they knew how fruitless it was to argue with a crow who would insist on having the last word. Forevermore!

Close to satisfied that proper respect was being paid at last, the big bird said, not without irony, "Thank you for your kind attention! Without further interruption, Crow-Lady will continue.

"Sitting in the arms of the Rooted-Ones, crows watch.

"Day in, day out, crows watch.

"Sitting in the arms of the Rooted-Ones, much is revealed.

"Day in, day out, much is revealed.

"Behind Rect-World windows, there are stories--oh yes! The stories Crow-Lady could tell! Of Who-Mans engaged in activities no self-respecting spider would indulge in...but another time...another time..."

"You see, the story is not inside Who-Man boxes--it is inside the animal-boxes where the real strangeness lies, where things happen--things hard to credit, things even crows in all

their wisdom have a hard time believing...

"Things you ignorant Wilds need to know!

"Oh, yes.

"Some of the biggest animal-boxes, larger than prairie-dog towns used to be, contain Domesticates living crammed together tighter than maggots on a dead duck. Oh, yes! Believe what Crow-Lady tells you! All their lives are spent inside these walls--no sun, no stars, no clans, no homelands--chained down, or in cages so small they couldn't scratch an itch to save their lives!"

A uneasy rustle ran through the crowd of animals--a life without movement? Without clan-ties, without the company of Sister Sun and Brother Moon?

Crow-Lady, pleased to find her audience captive at last, went on. "Of course Domesticates never have to worry about hunger, far from it--but they pay, oh, how they pay. Besides their own kind, they never see another living thing, plant or animal, except for the odd Who-Man who brings them food--nasty boring stuff crows won't touch, (although pigeons might)--sometimes made from the wretched dead bodies of their own kind.

"And that's not the half of it! Who-mans have probed their being-codes until these creatures no longer know who they are. Co-Species Pacts, animal-autonomies--all forgotten! And even if they had traditions, there is no way to pass them on. Males and females are kept apart, young separated from old, babies often taken away at birth. Any remnant urges to forge clan ties are simply torture to these beasts because such bonding is impossible! Whatever remaining intelligence they maintain only reveals the extent of their misfortune.

"Pity the poor pigs! They have no equal in suffering--and pity any Wild unfortunate enough to live nearby these poisonous hog-holes. Some time ago uncounted pigs drowned in droves when an angry river full of sickened fish rose to take revenge.

"Pity the poor cows, who become mad and diseased, and are killed and burned by Who-Mans. Pity the poor chickens, who pass on harmful agents to Who-Mans only to be take away and burned by the millions. Wasteful lives, wasteful deaths!

"And theirs is a death without honor, a humiliation forced upon them. They are allowed no last exhilarating battle, no last quickening run to begin their journey to the other side. After this passive ignoble end, their rank and fear-tainted bodies are delivered to the tables of Who-Mans where they are consumed without ritual, without respect for their overwhelming sacrifice of both life and death.

"Their mean endings insult Mother Death--still, death in whatever fashion releases them from unspeakable bondage, from unlivable lives. Crows have seen that these animals are born, live, and die in ways no creature, even a Domesticate, deserves."

Crow-Lady paused here to take stock of her audience. Smart bird that she was, she knew that Wilds too often simply went about their business and ignored what was happening around them...indeed, this head-in-the-sand attitude had forced the far-seeing Crow-Company to take action, even against the advice of many of their members.

Many in the Company had doubted the wisdom of moving to Rect-World, and their arguments continued to grow as crows fell dead from the deadly bites of small flying creatures called mosquitoes. Crows, unlike frogs, were not interested in foolhardy self-sacrifice, and recently the Company had advised its members to leave Rect-World. But Crows were finding, like the Deer Populace, that Rect-World followed them wherever they went. There was no escape anymore.

Was this to be the crow-reward? Lost homelands, lost lives? Had the Crow Company unwittingly given away too much?

All the more reason for Wilds to listen and take heed! Other deaths might go unnoticed, but crow-sacrifice must not be taken for granted by any ungrateful, ignorant Wild!

During her musings, Crow-Lady noticed that her tales had caused a bristling within the ranks of the animals. Many Wilds were suspicious, refusing to see Domesticates as either heroes or victims. Yet...the reports were disturbing. Domesticates and Who-Mans often behaved oddly--but madness, burnings, drownings?

Crow-Lady concluded with dark words of warning: "Wilds must not ignore the Domesticate plight, or disregard their sacrifices and efforts to fight the Who-Mans who imprison them! If conditions do not improve for all animals, Domesticate and Wild alike will be forced to rely on Who-mans for survival. That, as the crow knows only too well, will mean the end of WEarth."

A wild racket of hoots and howls followed Crow-Lady's words.

"WEarth Forever! Rect-World Never!" the audience cried. And also "Born Wild, die Wild!"

Rodential Advice

"Air-heads, egotists, idiots, oafs, underwits, all and every one of you!" Out of the cacophony, came a thin and high-pitched voice, small yet piercing enough to cut through the agitated crowd.

"Who speaks such vocalic insults?" growled Madame Lion.

"It is I! Unsung member of Rat Nation. Listen to ME, I will tell you the story that even Crows don't know, for what you fear has already come to pass!"

"NO, no-no-no-no-NO!" cried a limber and quick Hyena, appealing with a wide obsequious smile to Madame Lion. "Rats are not to be trusted. They are Half-wilds. They are not like us. Rat must not speak, for his kind has lost wisdom, and must only listen, yes, only listen," and here Hyena put on his most ingratiating tone, "to relearn the true ways."

Madame Lion, her lips stretching out to reveal sharp canines, pointedly looked away from the hyena and said only, "Speak, Friend Rat."

A nearly imperceptible smirk of triumph shook Rat's whiskers. Then, directing her sharp nose up into the air, she began. "I know Rect-World better than any of you, and I have seen Who-mans spread into every corner of the earth. There is no escaping them--they and their Time-Eaters are unstoppable. All animals everywhere are at their mercy, and no sacrifice, no Wild plan will make any difference.

"Ask my Rat-kin, born to die in cages--every day poisoned, injected with diseases, cut, killed--hundreds, thousands of them and who lifts an eyelid? No one! None of you, certainly! You are only glad that it is the rat who suffers and not yourself or your own kin."

The Long-Arms jumped up to object, but Madame Lion squelched their protest with a look.

"Frogs were daft to disappear," Rat went on when the disturbance had passed. "A worthless sacrifice. Who do frogs think they are? They should have known their place, as rats do. What do Who-Mans care about frogs? Their disappearance is not even a minor inconvenience--they care more about the needs of their Shiny Ones than the needs of frogs.

"Besides, Who-Mans are used to things disappearing. It is their special gift, their obsession--whatever they touch, POOF, it is gone. They see a Wild homeland, and their fingers itch to destroy it, to 'develop' it as they call it, a word which shows how they delude themselves.

"Who-Mans and their soul-less creations heat up the world with endless, useless, destructive activities, yet they care nothing for the consequences of these fevered and inflammatory actions. They neither see nor care that Abundance gathers up her wide skirts and leaves. In their blindness, they believe that their own cunning and cleverness, along with more and better Time-Eaters, will more than make up for any losses. Your plans are brave, but

foolish. No animal can stop them!"

Taking a deep breath, she said, "We must use other means."

"What are you suggesting, Friend Rat?" asked the President.

"It is obvious. We should have done it sooner, only Wilds are so wrapped up in their little lives, so micro-involved in their delusions of superiority over Domesticates that they have too long delayed, refusing to face the truth."

Rat's words raised an angry muttering from the crowd, but holding her ground, she fairly spat out the following words:

"The Powers. It is time to call upon the Powers."

The animals froze. "Powers, Powers, Powers, Powers" echoed like an incantation throughout the crowd.

"We must invoke the Great Dance," asserted the Rat.

Utter silence fell as the animals absorbed her message.

Who alive or dead did not know the matchless terror of the Great Dance!

Invitation to the Dance

Oh, the Great Dance.

To which there is no invitation; to which there is no escape.

For once the Dance begins,

There is only the Dance...

Where all creatures on the great spinning globe

Are wallflowers, fragile,

Fearful, trembling at rhythms

Beyond their skill and strength, wondering,

Who will be around when the Piper is paid?

And the more heated the world,

The more heated the Dance.

The warmer the world, the wilder the Dance.

The more wild the Dance,

The more wild the world.

For once the Dance begins,
There is only the Dance...

...where Sun, Wind and Water match each other step for step, magnifying, maneuvering, caught up in a magnetic rhythm growing ever more complex and intricate as Earth herself is drawn in, grinding, rocking, squeezing, pushing, opening--letting loose the deep fires within her body flowing upward through her veins, upward to join with Sun, Wind, Water, to match them step for step...

Bit by bit, animal by animal, species by species, Rat's logic spread.

The Great Dance!
Sweeping away all that is not true...
Sweeping away all that lies in front of it.
Loosing the deep rhythms of Truth,
Breaking down all forms not reflecting
The fearful symmetry of Truth
Unchanged, unchained...

Shocked silence gave way to waves of whispered exultation. In spite of the risks, in spite of the chance that none might look upon the bright face of Sun again, a welling YES rose in their minds and hearts. Beauty beckoned and wild thoughts of the spectacle to come electrified their souls.

There is nothing like the Dance! Nothing in the world!
YES! Only YES! The Powers must, the Powers WILL prevail!
Madame Lion lifted her great paw once and brought them all to silence.
"We understand," she said simply.

"It is better to go wrapped in the fierce embrace of Sun and Earth than to go one by one, sick, starved, homeless, or worse, imprisoned by those who do not know our souls, much less their own. We must make our call."

She shook her great head as if to clear it of any impediment to reason.

"Are all in agreement?" she asked.

The Call of the Wilds

The voices of the animals rose in a round howl of assent.

"Then I wish you all survival," said the golden beast on the Speaker's Rock. "I wish you all the continuing beat of life. We cannot know when or if we shall meet again, but let our Wild minds forever mark this day. Let us remember the beauty and strength of our forms and numbers, for our great round mother who bore us may never see our like again."

Then, rising to her fullest height, with Sun streaming down her back and Moon reflecting in her eye, the lioness said,

"Let the Dance begin."

And then she turned her head, as did all the rest of the animals, looking first to the golden Sun gleaming above them and for an instant letting the fierce and fiery power pierce their minds. Then swinging their heads around, they shot rounds of light from their eyes to the glistening silver moon above. In a downward spiral from the moon their eyes sought the streaming waters and the solid land, causing shimmering wheels of light to fall upon the earth. Then upwards again their eyes circled and searched for the winds, all winds from all directions who were finally found playing up, up, up and away beyond the clouds, but the magnetic animal-eyes drew them out and down to spread and unfurl radiant whirls into the far reaches of earth, and sky, and beyond.

The stars above, feeling a strange surge from the blue and white swirling ball below them, lined up to gain a better vantage point.

"NOW!" spoke the Lion in a roar that made no sound, coming from nowhere and everywhere in a single moment. And the animals, united, took a deep breath and held it, while silence unheard for an eternity held the entire planet in its grip. All was still, with everything held in place for a moment that stretched and stretched until the very air was crystalline, brittle enough to shatter into an infinity of pieces, or more. The stillness stretched out and Sun, Moon, Winds, Waters and Fires saw themselves reflected and magnified in its brilliant depths.

In the Beginning

Unutterably moved by the thrill of their own beauty, the Powers began the first steps of the Dance, tender, delicate, like the movement of butterfly wings, slow, exquisite, subtle--a pulse, vibration, a flutter of air that grew as the Dance took on power, expanding as the Powers danced.

"YES," cried the animals, letting out their breath in a wild rush that fled across the earth, shattering and splitting the silence like winter ice giving way to spring, clattering, flowing, pounding, echoing to the stars.

"YES," cried the Sun, drawing together her many rays into fierce focus that pierced and bathed the earth in beams and sprays of light.

"YES," spoke the Earth, her body writhing in a deep, grinding motion, freeing the fires within as they pulsed upwards through her giving body to BOOM! explode into the sky where fire joined wind in a manic tangle, leaping, jumping, blazing, forcing all who could still use their limbs to dance to their tune.

"YES," moaned the Winds as they wound tight around each other, braiding together in ropes, warm and cold, coiling together into upward spirals, and then WHOOSH--letting go to whip and snap clouds into frenzied motion, herding them into roiling stampedes, one after another, moving across the face of sea and plain, holding tight to everything in their path, grabbing all before them in a tossing, turning wild ballet, a churning, twirling waltz.

"YES," pulsed the Moon, nudging tides to and fro with long, silken, persistent silver-fingers, reaching, pushing, back and forth, back and forth with a drumming beat, an ebb and flow that moved sinuous curves of water in from the depths to fondle the shore, moving boldly, boldly, inch by inch, yard by yard, mile by mile, grabbing, ripping at the land and all its decorations like an eager lover stripping away more and more and more...

"YES," spoke the Waters, wild and rampant, rising, rising, river-fingers raking, taking back ancestral lands, dark and blood-red currents, earth-laden flows pouring, streaming into green and silver seas; oceans moving, absorbing myriad pushes and pulls from Sun and Moon and Wind, building into stepped towers of fluid rhythm, dancing a delirious passage back to land--the wild sea reaching, embracing, water-hands exulting in the feel of rocks and sand and shore, then letting go! letting go! letting go, all energy loosed, appeased, satiated...but still, the great and fearsome water-heart beating, beating, building...oh, to touch again the sinuous moving shoreline, the softness of sands, the hardness of rock...hunger building, building...sea heart pounding, pounding...water and sand, sand and water...leading, following, following, leading...sea and shore, shore and sea...each giving away integral form to merge, merge and merge again.

YES is ALL.
ALL is NOW.
NOW grows and grows.
Time expands inward.
Future and Past rush to its center, shrinking,
disappearing
in a flash of green light,
as if they had never been.

Conceived
by the union of Time and Place.
They may grow again,

Or not.

The Meeting Adjourns

In the great black bowl of the sky, the stars watch. Although they tried, they could not see the animals streaking away to the fragile protection of remaining homelands. Indeed, the stars cannot see anything but a great grey ball beneath them, turning and turning as it wings its way around the sun.

The stars feel empty--no longer do bears, rams, lions, snakes, and coyotes roam in their midst. No longer do shimmering dippers pour cosmic waters into the great goblet of the sky.

Now, stars are just stars, stripped of names and stories. With nothing to hold them, they slip away, one by one, retreating into the infinite distance, sliding through the universe into the furthest reaches of darkness.

Will they wait, again, the stars,
To be named once more?
For the stories to begin?
For the creatures to come
To make light of the darkness?

Or did this time the meeting adjourn
Forevermore?

