

## Death of a Herdsman (Yvette Rippliner)

He pushed himself up to midstream,  
his strong horse bucking under him.  
For time had come for him to take over  
his part of the labour:  
his to gather the herd, scattered wide,  
floundering in the river's tide,  
take them across the river,  
keeping their heads above water,  
calmly, patiently, side by side,  
to reach the shore, solid, steady,  
and ready them for a longer ride.

It was a dangerous river  
made unruly from a flesh flood  
with contrary currents bent to mar his design,  
swift frightening waters surrounding his flock,  
threatening his safety, all he had in his care.  
He knew it could be done, if only  
the herd would huddle peacefully,  
swim patiently, purposefully, their blood  
kept cool, their heads reasoned,  
their bodies one large stolid mass, a safety wall  
against the mounting tide.

He kept his eyes steady on the stray ones,  
the weaker ones, not yet travelled,  
not yet used to herd life, still too headstrong  
or too young; impatient in motion,  
new to the sense of whole, and direction.  
He would then turn back, keeping his horse afloat,  
the beast under him tense, yet sensing his strong will,  
sensing his deep purpose,  
in the end obedient,  
to nudge the new-born, lagging,  
frightened by effort, weakened by fight,  
nudge them along to the shore, still struggling,  
to breathe new life and then go on  
to wider expanses, refreshed, reborn.

He went back many times, never seeming  
to fear, to tire, and never wavering:  
watchful shepherd, eyes alert, mind on guard,  
knowing the job was not yet done  
till every one was on land, safely gone.  
Then he went back once more...

With no warning,  
the violent waters came upon him, churning,  
overwhelming.  
His hold was lost, his steadfast friend  
left alone in the swift cold current  
to scramble as it could.  
The River had caught him alone at last.  
He was carried away, struggling still,  
helpless flotsam within a stronger Will,  
and then lost...

Not all the herd had reached the solid shore,  
yet he had shown the way, of many borne the plight,  
fought their fight  
and, to the very last, done his task.  
For his was to help the herd safely across the shore,  
only this, nothing more.

18 September 1961

"In September 1954 I had the opportunity to attend the Venice Film Festival. Among the films reviewed, there was an Australian documentary depicting the way a responsible herdsman worked while leading herds across the country to their final destination. I still remember the herdsman figure, sitting on his horse with part of his face hidden by his large hat's shadow, so you saw only his profile, watching calmly but with impressive vigilance all the motions of the herd, and going to the rescue whenever necessary.

The day that brought the news of the Secretary-General's accidental death was a long and difficult one for, by an unfortunate coincidence, it also marked the start of a new Technical Assistance Programme, with the arrival of a large group of African Fellows, rather demoralized by the news. Yet, for the sake of the work and the planned briefings, all manifestations of grief had to be pushed aside. After 6:00 P.M., when all activities had ceased, I was finally alone in my office on the 27th floor, free to give way to my own feelings of great loss. I was staring through the window at the GA Building that looked like an empty shell when, all of a sudden, the images of the Australian film seen in Venice years before came back to me and I saw again the watchful horseman responsible for the crossing of his herd to safer ground; strangely enough, the face under the hat had become that of Dag Hammarskjöld. Immediately afterwards, I sat down at my typewriter and the poem, *Death of a Herdsman*, was the result.

Many things in this poem, of course, are symbolic. The "contrary currents" may be viewed as political manoeuvres or opponents; "his design" was of course, the emergence of new nations; the "weaker ones" small and politically untried, needing "their blood kept cool, their heads reasoned;" as to "the watchful shepherd, eyes alert, mind on guard, knowing the job was not yet done" it is of course a strong analogy with Hammarskjöld in the UN context. Then, tragedy strikes. For those knowing the problems with Africa, the new nations and the world at the time, some of the analogies will not remain obscure. And the last stanza is, of course, an homage to the figure of the much-regretted Secretary-General".

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