A Late Manuscript Version of “An Octopus”

An Octopus

of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies “in grandeur and in mass”
beneath a sea of shifting snow dunes;
dots of cyclamen red and maroon on its clearly defined
  pseudopodia
made of glass that will bend—a much needed invention—
comprising twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hundred feet
  thick,
of unimaginable delicacy.
“Picking periwinkles from the cracks”
or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the python,
it hovers forward “spider fashion
  on its arms” misleadingly like lace;
its “ghostly pallor changing
  to the green metallic tinge of an anemone starred pool.”
The firtrees in “the magnitude of their root systems,”
rise aloof from these manoeuvres “creepy to behold”—
austere specimens of our American royal families,
“each like the shadow of the one beside it.
The rock seems frail compared with their dark energy of life,”
the vermillion and onyx and manganese blue interior
  expensiveness
left at the mercy of the weather;
“stained transversely by iron where the water drips down,”
recognized by its plants and its animals.
Completing a circle,
you have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed,
under the polite needles of the larches
“hung to filter not to intercept the sunlight”—
met by tightly wattled spruce twigs
“conformed to an edge like clipped cypress
  as if no branch could penetrate the cold beyond its company;”
and dumps of gold and silver ore enclosing The Goat's Mirror—
that lady-fingerlike depression in the shape of the left human foot,
which prejudices you in favor of itself before you have had time to see the others;
it's indigo, black, green, blue-green, and turquoise
from a hundred to two hundred feet deep,
"merging in irregular patches in the middle lake
where like gusts of a storm,
obliterating the shadows of the firtrees, the wind makes lanes of ripples."
What spot could have merits of equal importance
for bears, elk, deer, wolves, goats, and ducks?
Preempted by their ancestors,
this is the property of the exacting porcupine,
and of the rat "slipping along to its burrow in the swamp
or pausing on high ground to smell the heather;"
of "thoughtful beavers
making drains which seem the work of careful men with shovels—
and of the bears inspecting unexpectedly
ant hills and berry bushes.
Composed of calcium gems and alabaster pillars,
topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz,
their den is somewhere else, concealed in the confusion
of "blue stone forests thrown together with marble and jasper
and agate
as if whole quarries had been dynamited."
And farther up in stag-at-bay position
as a scintillating fragment of these terrible stalagmites,
stands the goat,
its eye fixed on the waterfall which never seems to fall—
an endless skein swayed by the wind,
immune to force of gravity in the perspective of the peaks.
A special antelope
acclimated to "grottoes from which issue penetrating draughts
which make you wonder why you came;"
it stands its ground
on cliffs the color of the clouds, of petrified white vapor—
black feet, eyes, nose, and horns engraved on dazzling icefields,
the ermine body on the crystal peak;
the sun kindling its shoulders to maximum heat like acetylene,
dying them white;
upon this antique pedestal—
"a mountain with those graceful lines which prove it a volcano."

its top a complete cone like Fujiyama's
till an explosion blew it off.
Maintaining many minds, distinguished by a beauty
of which "the visitor dare never fully speak at home
for fear of being stoned as an imposter;"
Big Snow Mountain is the home of a diversity of creatures;
those who "have lived in hotels
but who now live in camps—who prefer to;"
the mountain guide evolving from the trapper,
"in two pairs of trousers, the outer one older,
wear slowly away from the feet to the knees;"
"the nine-striped chipmunk
running with unmammal-like agility along a log;"
the water ouzel
with "its passion for rapids and high pressured falls,"
building under the arch of some tiny Niagara:
the white-tailed ptarmigan "in winter solid white,
feeding on heather bell's and alpine buckwheat;"
and the eleven eagles of the west,
"fond of the spring fragrance and the winter colors,"
used to the unegotistic action of the glaciers
and "several hours of frost every midsummer night."
They make a nice appearance, don't they,
happy seeing nothing?
Perched on treacherous lava and pumice—
those unadjusted chimney-pots and cleavers
which stipulate "names and addresses of persons to notify
in case of disaster—"
they hear the roar of ice and supervise the water
winding slowly through the cliffs,
the road "climbing like the thread
which forms the groove around a snail-shell,
doubting back and forth until where snow begins, it ends."
No "deliberate wide-eyed wistfulness" is here
among the boulders sunk in ripples and white water
where "when you hear the best wild music of the forest
it is sure to be a badger,"
the victim on some slight observatory,
of "a struggle between curiosity and caution,
inquiring what has scared it:
the stone from the moraine descending in leaps,
another badger, or the spotted ponies with "glass eyes,"
brought up on frosty grass and flowers
and rapid draughts of ice water.
Instructed none knows how, to climb the mountain,
by "business men who as totemic scenery of Canada,
require for recreation,
Like happy souls in Hell,
enjoying mental difficulties,
the golden grasshoppers of Greece
amused themselves with delicate behavior
because it was "so noble and so fair;"
not practiced in adapting their intelligence
to eagle traps and snowshoes,
to alpenstocks and other toys contrived by those
"alive to the advantage of invigorating pleasures."
Bows, arrows, oars, and paddles for which trees provide the
wood,
in new countries are more eloquent than elsewhere—
augmenting evidence for the assertion
that essentially humane,
"the forest affords wood for dwellings and by its beauty stimu-
lates
the moral vigor of its citizens."
The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was back
of what could not be clearly seen
resolving with benevolent conclusiveness,
"complexities which still will be complexities
as long as the world lasts;"
ascribing what we clumsily call happiness,
to "an accident or a quality,
a spiritual substance or the soul itself,
an act or a disposition or a habit
or a habit infused to which the soul has been persuaded,
or something distinct from a habit, a power—
such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of.
"Emotionally sensitive, their hearts were hard;"
their wisdom was remote
from that of these odd oracles of cool official sarcasm,
upon this game preserve
where "guns, nets, seines, traps, and explosives,
hired vehicles, gambling, and intoxicants are prohibited,
disobedient persons being summarily removed
and not allowed to return without permission in writing."
It is self-evident
that it is frightful have everything afraid of one;
that one must do as one is told
and eat "rice, prunes, dates, raisins, hardtack, and
tomatoes"
if one would "conquer the main peak" of Mount Tacoma—
this fossil flower concise without a shiver,
intact when it is cut,
damned for its sacrosanct remoteness—
like Henry James "damned by the public for decorum;"
not decorum, but restraint; it was the love of doing hard things that rebuffed and wore them out—a public out of sympathy with neatness.

Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!

"Occasioning no little consternation," relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus with its capacity for fact.

"Creeping slowly as with meditated stealth, its arms seeming to approach from all directions," it receives one under winds that "tear the snow to bits and hurl it like a sandblast, shearing off twigs and loose bark from the trees."

Is tree the word for these strange things "flat on the ground like vines;"
some "bent in a half circle with branches on one side suggesting dustbrushes, not trees;
some finding strength in union, forming little stunted groves, their flattened mats of branches shrunk in trying to escape" from the hard mountain "planed by ice and polished by the wind"—

the white volcano with no weather side;
the lightning flashing at its base,
rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak—the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed, its claw cut by the avalanche
"with a sound like the crack of a rifle, in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall."

1 On the manuscript, Moore ruled out this line and capitalized the first word of the following line.

The manuscript is published by courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum and Library.

Critical representations of Marianne Moore are shot through, as representations of America used to be, with negatives. From the critical writing which has attached itself to Moore's work, we may abstract a catalogue of things supposed to be missing from her poetry, a long list of absences—and a damning one if it should prove valid—comprising much of what we profess to value, in or out of literature. There are in her poems virtually no human figures; and so of course there is no sex or love or lust, for blood or power or even money; no real evil, and no mere brutality, either; no genuine moral complexity, therefore, and no tragedy or comedy. According to one recent critic, in reading Moore we must even be ready to "relinquish" the "satisfactions" of "consistency, symmetry, logic."3

If Moore's poems are often "unpeopled," in Hugh Kenner's phrase, at least there are animals to serve as moral exemplars—animals described in minute detail, and moving upon landscapes depicted with equal care and precision. But this choice of subject is also, in the eyes of many critics, a limitation; as Randall Jarrell puts it, "Miss Moore sent postcards to only the nicer animals," willfully transforming "the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm, into a realm of good," and sacrificing a great deal in the process. R. P. Blackmur makes a related point: "Compare her animal poems with those of D. H. Lawrence," he urges. "In Lawrence you feel you have touched the plasm; in Miss Moore you feel you have escaped and come on the idea. The other life is there, but it is round the corner, not so much taken for granted as

John M. Slatin

"Advancing Backward in a Circle": Marianne Moore as (Natural) Historian