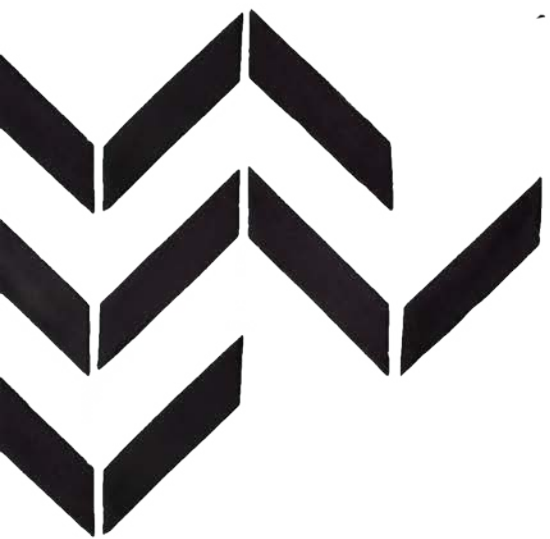




**THE RESEMBLANCE OF THE ENZYMES
OF GRASSES TO THOSE OF WHALES
IS A FAMILY RESEMBLANCE**

Lisa Olstein

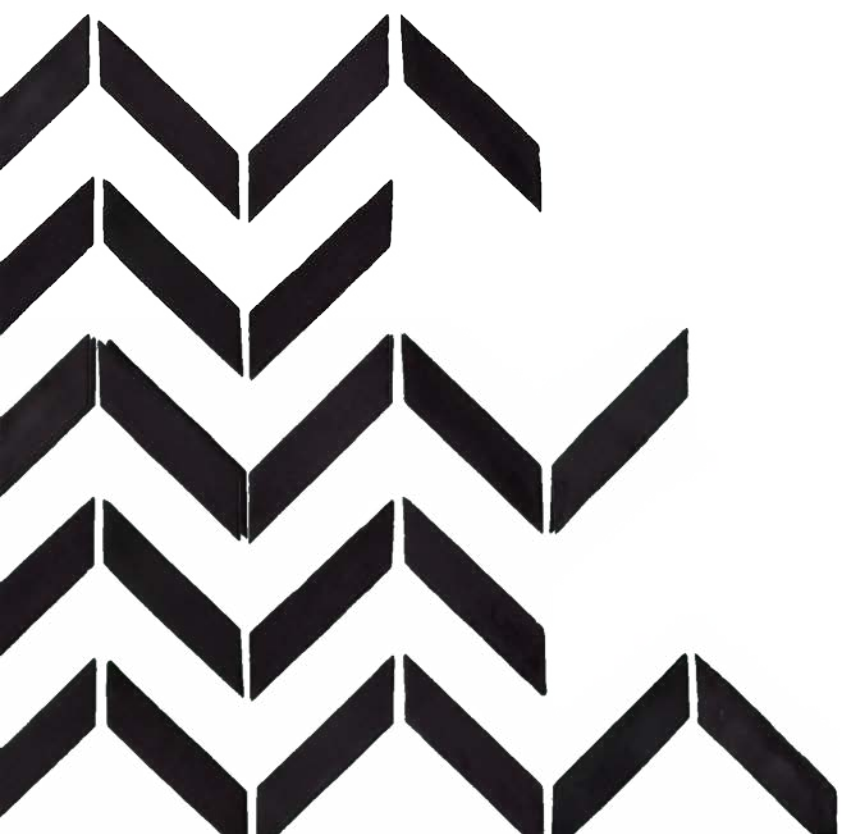




**THE RESEMBLANCE OF
THE ENZYMES OF
GRASSES TO THOSE OF
WHALES IS A
FAMILY RESEMBLANCE**

LISA OLSTEIN

a winner of the 2015 Essay Press
Digital Chapbook Contest
selected by Shane McCrae



#72

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INTRODUCTION

– SHANE MCCRAE

Again and again, in *The Resemblance of the Enzymes of Grasses to Those of Whales is a Family Resemblance*, Lisa Olstein foreshadows an apocalypse that, spoiler alert, never comes—at least, it *hasn't* come by the end of the book—and, it seems to me, Olstein wants readers to understand both that it is coming nevertheless and that it must not come. And so the book ends with a long sentence that is at once anxious and rapturous:

I saw it happen, Whistle, what the billboards describe, I saw it begin, a noiseless slipping of the face beneath the surface, the silence of going under, and in this case by chance or by vigilance the awful invisibility was visible enough to be reversed by swift leap and wild grasp and then he was in my arms again, Whistle, like a newborn gasping and because he is mine, he is mine, he is mine, because on that day he did not die, because my fear from him I try to hide, because in the womb all sound is a kind of music, I started singing.

Throughout the text, the speaker addresses an apparent other named “Whistle,” though it is never entirely clear that Whistle is

an other, and it seems almost as likely to me that Whistle refers *not* to an other, not exactly, but instead to a kind of rhetoric—dog-whistle rhetoric. Because *The Resemblance of the Enzymes of Grasses to Those of Whales is a Family Resemblance* speaks not only to the coming apocalypses, but also to our rapidly degrading methods of publicly addressing them—one dog-whistle after another, each less content-bearing, each more purely a *form* of address, than the one before it. Planetary collapse is preceded by linguistic collapse. *The Resemblance of the Enzymes of Grasses to Those of Whales is a Family Resemblance* is a bulwark and a warning against both kinds of collapse.



THE RESEMBLANCE OF THE ENZYMES OF GRASSES TO THOSE OF WHALES IS A FAMILY RESEMBLANCE





THE RESEMBLANCE OF THE ENZYMES OF GRASSES TO THOSE OF WHALES IS A FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

This world, Whistle, there's nothing for it, what can we possibly say? Cumulus sails and their endless blue ocean are a thin skin when viewed from space. Back home astronauts turn to drink or religion to shield the eyes, to cloud the vision—something was irreparable in the darkness or the largeness or the smallness they saw. This morning, I watched two elephants dance the boogie-woogie. One added grace notes with its trunk, nodding its head in cool time. The other—half-in, half-out of the frame—shook its booty just like my friend, the best singer you'll ever never hear because for her the stage turned into a kind of prison, like the refuge, maybe, staffed by good people who wondered how the elephants would respond to the piano's rollicking tune, or who knew how and couldn't wait to watch them move. This morning, these last few days have been kissed with crisp in a benevolent air kind of way. It's spring and birds are busy and there's a mulberry tree popping berries and the city sings in distant sirens and steady traffic thrum. Soon the sun will burn too terribly strong again and the drought we're presently forgetting will press back into view against the bleached rocks that line the reservoir down which the water continues to crawl. This winter, up north the far north reached too far south. Here, more than three hundred million trees have died since our current

thirst began. It's impossible not to feel thirsty, Whistle, under a sky like this. When a dead tree falls, a young, new tree will eventually grow in its place, a man named Burl who works for the forestry service reminds us, trying to be encouraging. I don't mean to be discouraging. It's beautiful here. It's just that fear has us in its thrall. Things are different or they're just like they've always been—we're not sure and we're not sure which is worse. We love it when animals act like us. I mean, just look at those elephants dancing. We see it as a kind of evidence, but maybe it's better for them to be nothing like us at all. They stop everything to mourn their dead. When choosing a direction, they engage in extensive debate. Rage follows cause. Whistle, they know when even a distant friend falls.

IT'S ANOTHER DEADLY DAY

Stepping thoughtless from the curb, the dead bird was a bouquet at my feet, feather-fringed meat for not even a night scavenger's hunger. The sad truth is, when it comes to protection or the casting of spells, the only viable solution to the madman is to hope he selects another according to what flies through the tunnel of his need: a length of hair or a cascade of chemicals on a given day combined with the mystery of traffic. This is no way to raise a daughter, Whistle, or oneself, up off the knees. Blond and 30, seen it all day, a panhandler wearily indicts my friend stepping from the train into night rounds on the cancer ward. Part of what's hard is the constant beeping, she says, and we've made that true now everywhere, machines calling out coded bridges between the heart of some need and the ears of their masters, as if through their wiring now wireless, they could reach everything at once and keep us all in mind, and in a way they do. Today on a bird walk, Whistle, at the wastewater treatment plant, the vermilion flycatcher was our man overboard, our rose lost at sea. All around, the foliage explained how we come back from a freeze, but we come back ugly: years of scarring measure one night's thick fist. *Melancholy*, sings the mockingbird, *Terror*. Nothing is ever the same.

SAD PROMOTION

Suddenly, Whistle, we wake to a flood of it, waves of data from all directions, and given the years and years of silence well beyond reasonable doubt, it's not unreasonable to wonder what new manipulation this sudden rush of information might be. As Kurt Cobain, a pain-shredded singer from my youth, before he blew off his head in a room over a garage adjacent to a lovely house he owned and when he did the radio station I favored broadcast his voice for 24 hours straight, supposedly said, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you. In a few months, Whistle, I'll speak to a large room full of inspired speakers, and in part I will discuss the powers that both of our trainings in language, different though they may be, prepare us to apprehend and to deploy. Each in our own way, Whistle, we are in love with language and information and results and with verdicts, too, me, too, if I'm being honest. Busy and important and depended upon each of us plows the field of our day. Our obligations, Whistle, are impossibly too many and possibly too few. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Love what you do. There is so much we like to think we choose. Some people believe we are born again and again and that even this is a kind of decision we make. A time of catastrophe provides an opportunity for the acceleration of spiritual growth is one take

on the matter. That fear isn't only an echo from the past, but the future calling is another. Maybe then this trembling, Whistle, is both someone else's and my own. I sensed a great sadness in the air over the entire block, writes my friend upon returning home from the protest, a great sadness in the air.

TO THE LEFT OF BOOM

For days, the world breaks down into a series of scenes: at the spring-fed pool on Mother's Day, in the produce aisle, at the ball game, golden lit, the about to be shattered, already doomed normal before the monster or the monster wave hits—sunshine on the canoe and glinting off the water smooth inches from the falls, innocently making a salad or taking a shower. It feels like a play today, Whistle, or like a shard of the future has lodged itself in my shoulder. Monday it's a report on the impossible future of bananas. Tuesday it's the story of limes held hostage by cartels. Both still appear on our shelves, but we don't know for how long. News comes and goes, but fate is a cycle longer to unfold. The fact is, we turn and turn away. Today the world is here for us with heart-shaped peaches ripening in a brown paper bag. There's no way to repay borrowed time, Whistle, so we spend it.

SPACE RACE

A city being built up, Whistle, looks a lot like a city being torn down—scaffolding and buckets, brick-sewn seams, dust clouds speckling the air. I'm planting a garden of all native species, but even it begins to feel like a zoo, a private parade of favored specimens. The rare pomegranate looks like the common carnation. Purple martins in fancy houses live with parasitic sparrows in their midst. It's the cost of doing business, because chasing them away takes all day. The days, Whistle, as some day you'll no doubt find out, are often tedious, circular corridors punctuated by doors opening onto small rushes of pleasure or pain, but in the end endless feeling, which is both a comfort and a source of despair, and either way an illusion we can't help but believe and know to be false at the very same time. So it's hard, Whistle, to keep the important questions in mind. A near miss reminds us: pulses drumming in our ears, tingling in every finger. What am I doing with my one little chance to be alive, my friend now distant sings through the car stereo I've put on because I miss her. Whistle, today they say the ocean will be empty in a future not too distant to imagine. There is a balancing act you will one day be introduced to and then never be free to unlearn between the concerns of the day and the concerns of what we call the bigger picture. A friend of my friend who was paralyzed

in a crash devotes herself to the cause of raising awareness about the small hard or even semi-soft objects of daily use that can become deadly projectiles under the right conditions and I have no doubt she is correct, she is in fact expert, she is all the proof she needs, but who among us can bring ourselves to batten down every small thing to some not even invented yet small hatch like an astronaut patiently securing his rounded utensils in the womb of a capsule hurtling through space? We have no choice but to pick and choose, Whistle, yet this same equation is what will open our eyes to a lifeless ocean in 50 years, maybe sooner, according to today's news we can't bear to read. Instead we take quizzes about our personalities and our character traits such as which marine animal are you?

NOW LEAD ME OUT OF THIS STORY, SPIRIT

The truth is, our regular problems are enough to fill the day. They occupy us completely. Just this week more than 250 schoolgirls were kidnapped at gunpoint and at gunpoint forced to wed. Prayer was just allowed at town meeting in America and though this might not sound dangerous, it is a kind of torch to the house we dreamed we built. Scars and burns. Psoriasis. Epidemics of all kinds. Whistle, we have no idea how worried to be about the unforeseen effects of scientists in corporate laboratories shuffling the DNA of our food, but we know enough to be terrified of the master they serve. "Master" is at once a horrific and a hallowed word in our lexicon, Whistle. Maybe it's one we should never use again. Master class, master lock, master key, master cleanse, master of ceremonies, master of his domain, mastery. Lucid dreaming is a technique to gain mastery over dreams. I've had dreams, Whistle, since I was a child, of Nazis coming to our neighborhood, of them standing in the street below our windows on the evening before the day they will take us or everything we own away. The near before, the pivot point between having and not having. Still having, having it taken from your very hands, Whistle, or having no choice but to watch it, to let it, go is exactly the moment most painful in the dream, which is always a little bit different, but mostly the

same: footsteps, long dark heavy coats, a chaos of choosing, belongings thrown from windows, but never the night inside the apartment, the hours there left to live.

A SIMPLE LESSON ON THE BURIED SPIRIT

This morning, Whistle, I overheard a man say on what could only be some kind of an audition, If you ask me, do I believe in a power, yes, but it's not some old guy with his hand on the joystick and if you want to call that god, sure. The woman he was talking to nodded and said nothing and one day, Whistle, we will ask you what you believe, but this is a dirty trick because really all any of us has to believe in is what we've been taught. On a hilltop in Galilee, a red heifer is guarded around the clock and her burnt-orange coat every day is parsed with a fine-toothed comb while several pairs of sanctified eyes scour the plains, the hills and valleys of her body searching for what they hope desperately never to find. Among my peers, there are parents who believe that the new generation, the one we're giving birth to, will arrive specially equipped to save us and Whistle, I sympathize, but this seems the dirtiest trick. We've lost the eyes of god, so don't look now, but we're looking at you. I used to read mention of the poem in a poem as a self-aggrandizing gesture, but now I feel it as an admission of guilt. Every butterfly in this conservatory I escape to was raised by hand to die on the altar of our enjoyment or each lived a charmed and protected life in these hallowed halls, a perfect melting pot, an ideal microcosm under a protective dome as

on the moon or Mars or wherever we may one day soon be heading. Today I stopped reading, Whistle, but I lingered to look at a picture of a full-grown Siberian tiger, 375 pounds, bowing its head and placing the enormous pink palm of its paw to the tiny pink palm of a toddler pressed to a pane of zoo glass. Innocence to innocence, a benediction, forgiveness, a warning? It bowed its head and pressed its paw and rubbed its cheek against the glass in front of the little girl's face before turning away, an animal in some places believed to be son of the same mother as man, in some places worshipped as a god, an animal smart enough to hunt us not for meat but for vengeance, Whistle, if given the chance.

OTHER THINGS IN VIEW

Often it's like a dream and we're stuck, the water's rising and we're running laps on a shrinking track. Just look at you, Whistle. Soon the beautiful, terrible demands of the day will break the hours around you into waves, no horizon in the distance and only occasionally the amnesia of deep sleep, otherwise a half-waking half-life that keeps all eyes trained on the next set of hurdles, on the stupid stopwatch. In other words, too often keeping afloat is all we can do. My friend does the math in her head, says, What are we talking about, will our children have no children, and Whistle, she means you. We mean we know already nestled in the pockets of all of the bodies are millions more, each of us a slippery bridge across we don't know what crossing soon foreclosed. From this position, Whistle, it seems everything has been a mistake. We ate when we were hungry. When we were forced to flee, we fled. Old movies look silly to us now and we wonder if ever anyone sat in the velvet dark staring up and thinking the giant jerking puppets and the women and children screaming beneath them looked life-like, like life. This week the 29th Godzilla movie will be released. Now we like the monster to mirror not just our fears, but the fears that are our fault.

THE INVENTION OF PERSPECTIVE

To get on with the business of making a life, my body put up stores as if for a long winter. It changed me, Whistle, as it should, and still I keep the evidence close. The chemical composition of human milk is case-specific, sugars and fats, proteins tailored to the moment at hand and the mouth. The temperature of the human chest, if it is a mother's with her infant upon it, will rise or fall by as many as 10 degrees as required for regulation. A young nursing mother once kept seven men and one baby alive with her milk for three weeks on a broken raft on the skin of the sea, a journey of hope gone awry and in the end they did endure a kind of safe passage to the dreamed-of shore from which they were promptly sent back. "Safe passage" is what we hope for and what we call a journey we survive. "Passing" we reserve for the dying, "passed" for the newly dead whom we wish safe passage to we don't know where. If we all painted our rooftops white, my friend says, it would be like erasing an entire year's harm. In the mind of a think tank lives the idea of a highway that powers the cars that drive it. The oldest maps are small wooden sculptures, Whistle, hand-carved, hand-smoothed, nut-brown, palm-sized replicas of the islands they describe from a distance of sea. The way they work is from something like a skin kayak or a dugout canoe, by turns you gaze out at the mist-veiled land rising across the waves and at its mirror in your hand and safely choose where to go or remember how to return.

A CRUCIAL ERROR

Drowning is silent, Whistle, a rash of new billboards around the city warns us. Along the way we learned the wrong lesson or we learned the lesson wrong. We believe in splashing and thrashing, something awful but at least kind of grand in its demand for our attention. A drowning person will pull you under, we've long been horrified to know and I'm not sure if that's still true, but alone out there or silently in our midst it's a quiet barely bobbing of the head, a sinking and a fruitless not quite lifting of the face we must fear. So much right now seems metaphorical, but they mean this literally. At the creek today, wading away from the happy dogs in neon canine flotation devices paddling after neon balls, in a thicket of murk a few feet from my feet I saw a red life jacket pinned between current and rock and I was too scared to say anything or to reach out. It had been there for a long time, or at least long enough. There was no thrashing, no bobbing. No one was missing from the festive shore, no one was looking for anyone, at least not anymore. A friend I grew up with, Whistle, was broken not by watching the truck wreck her sister but by the house she lived in ever after lined with pictures her parents blew up and framed and framed. There is a man who after many years of practice has found a way to cut a perfect hole in a perfect ceiling to give us back the sky in ways we didn't realize we'd lost or maybe never knew. For a million dollars he will install one for you and through many meticulous

calculations frame a god's eye or a god's eye view, a kind of empty nest from which you turn your gaze skyward to a floating egg, maybe grey, maybe blue, or almost any color at all if you watch during the sunset light sequence he installs to show you exactly how much to believe your own eyes. Maybe if everything is relative, Whistle, then everything in its moment is absolute.

ESSAY MEANS TO TRY

A golf course, a prison, a wastewater treatment plant, six gas stations, a dollar store, a BBQ-Beer-Barbershop, two Baptist churches, one mega church with a neon sign that flashes *What's Missing In C-H - - C-H? UR!*, a Quaker Meeting House, a women's and children's shelter, which I don't think is supposed to have a sign, Whistle, so the women and children might actually be safe inside, and signs for the Department of Corrections and the Department of Sanitation and the Department of Family and Children's Services, and, for three days, a small hunched falcon on the west wire above the paved wash-out labeled Walnut Creek, and dozens of brittle lawns are what I drive by on my way to and from each day, Whistle, lately crying. My friend who has had the shutters slam closed too many times around her says, If you've been crying for more than two weeks already, you may need help to stop. And my almost friend except he scares me says, This is exactly what Empire wants you to do, sit around crying or sit around writing, playing the small-time artist agitator role. Already during these two weeks of crying I've purchased seven books each of which felt important to own and taken 140 vitamins and filled three prescriptions, none to help with the crying. I've waited patiently or impatiently in countless lines, Whistle, sometimes crying, I've waited for news

of loved ones such as you. Crying is how we enter the world, Whistle. We all come by sea, we all come by storm, we all tear apart and are torn.

DESPAIR FIRE

Whistle, today I sat in a crowded room and listened to children accompany each other to the songs of their parents' youth. We wept and we cheered and we were relieved when it was over. Nothing is uglier than a parent's anger at her child, nothing floods a person quite like the terrible tenderness, the desperate hope that he be spared. Later, my mouth was full of chocolate when I cried out alone in the car upon hearing the hostage's father explain that for all the years of his son's captivity, he lived according to the captors' time, waking, eating, sighing, sleeping out of sync with everyone around him as a way to stay connected, or maybe it was a form of distraction, the way my friend teaches terrified children to put their ears in the water by getting them to say, Aloha, and other silly-sounding Hawaiian words or maybe the Hawaiian words are to distract him during the endless hours in the pale, lifeless pool or maybe they remind him of the blue-sea day he knew he wanted to devote his life to water, which he does, but not in the way he imagined. The father's son has come back, Whistle, but not in the way he imagined. "Guilty" was the verdict reached in the trial held by stolen candlelight in a court of starvation and depravation over a series of Auschwitz nights. God is guilty as charged, they said, then, let us pray.

EVERY PASTORAL IS AN ELEGY

Once I flipped, Whistle, over the front of a horse I was riding. He balked, pulled up, and above his dappled gray shoulder I sailed to the sawdust floor belly up and tucked neatly beneath his raised razored hooves. Whistle, he stopped, miraculous in mid-air, in mid-step, in micro-seconds, with great force of will and greater strain of muscle he refused something physics ordained, something for which he could bear no blame, like a god he interrupted cruel fate on my behalf. Later, from his back I spied in his turnout a perfect woven cup, a swallow's nest of hair plucked from mane or tail. Our bodies, Whistle, are the material of essential matters we can't foresee. If an alien in a galaxy 65 million light years away is looking at us through a telescope right now, it's looking at dinosaurs, says an astronomer on the radio on the anniversary of a famous stargazer's death. It's simple, he says, the reason we find no evidence of life-forms like us is they too quickly destroy their planets. Which animals do you think keep us company, my friend asks, in past and future knowing? Maybe whales, I say, maybe elephants, but we've already talked too much about sadness today and birds can know only the present tense of their flying we agree and agree to leave it there. Pigeons scour the sidewalk, grackles scour the air. Relief after rainstorms. Some days even business as usual

feels rare. If you watch to the end, the amateur videographer says in a post below the movie he took of himself saving a fawn stuck between the metal bars of a neighborhood fence, it almost looks like the mother is thanking us. I saw it happen, Whistle, what the billboards describe, I saw it begin, a noiseless slipping of the face beneath the surface, the silence of going under, and in this case by chance or by vigilance the awful invisibility was visible enough to be reversed by swift leap and wild grasp and then he was in my arms again, Whistle, like a newborn gasping and because he is mine, he is mine, he is mine, because on that day he did not die, because my fear from him I try to hide, because in the womb all sound is a kind of music, I started singing.

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AUTHOR BIO



Photo by Matt Valentine

Lisa Olstein is the author of three books of poetry, most recently, *Little Stranger*. A new collection, *Late Empire*, is forthcoming in 2017. She is a member of the poetry faculty at the University of Texas at Austin.



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