

## Elephant Riding

Climbing up  
the back of an elephant  
you spring into  
the toehold of its tail

5 held in place by the mahout<sup>1</sup>  
grab the ropes  
strapped round its belly  
& haul yourself up.  
She rises

10 from buckled knees under you  
moves like a ship  
you're high  
under the hanging ashoka leaves  
as you flow forward

15 her fly-bitten ears grey sails flap.  
She flings the odd young-leaved branch  
into her mouth  
with her triumphant trunk.  
You want to scratch

20 the top of her stubbled head  
tell her it's like riding a whale  
they're both your favourite creatures  
you'd like to know their languages  
couldn't she speak

25 just a little of hers?  
But the mahout down on the road  
rubs thumb & fingers together  
furiously you nod  
*yes pay, of course we'll pay*

30 thinking, if he doesn't  
accept our offer, let me down  
I'll be stuck up here forever  
riding New Delhi streets  
with the mahout's boy

35 or it'll suddenly have had enough  
trumpet & fling me off or bolt.  
*I'd never have paid*  
*till he let you down*  
you said, as we watched her

40 join the diesel-belching traffic circle  
my ship of the jungle  
dirty & grey  
non-caparisoned<sup>2</sup>, gentle, knowing, female  
working animal.

45 In India, they say  
a woman is beautiful  
when she walks  
like an elephant.

From: *Only One Angel* by Jan Kemp, University of Otago Press, Dunedin , N.Z. (2001)

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<sup>1</sup> mahout: an elephant rider, trainer or keeper

<sup>2</sup> non-caparisoned: unadorned

In what ways is the speaker's perception of the elephant and the experience developed during the course of the poem?

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