

Elephant Riding

Climbing up
the back of an elephant
you spring into
the toehold of its tail
5 held in place by the mahout¹
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-caparisoned², 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)

¹ mahout: an elephant rider, trainer or keeper

² non-caparisoned: unadorned

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