

Catherine Tufariello

## DRACUNCULUS MEDINENSIS

For I will consider the Guinea worm.  
For its Latin name means “little dragon.”  
For its life cycle is remarkable to behold.  
For it has the ingenious improbability of the human eye, or the dance of  
the bee, or the shell’s Fibonacci spirals.  
For its invisible larva is a vigorous swimmer.  
For its thrashing attracts the water flea called *Cyclops*.  
For *Cyclops* engulfs it, as the whale did Jonah.  
For it does its first host no harm.  
For it swells in the belly of *Cyclops* for fourteen days.  
For a man drinks polluted water from a pond, a woman from a well, a  
child from the cup of her hands.  
For the second host’s belly destroys the flea, freeing the larva inside.  
For it cannot destroy the larva.  
For it burrows through the wall of the intestine.  
For the male and female meet in their peregrinations.  
For the tiny male soon dies, but the breeding female grows.  
For the breeding female, in the course of a year, grows up to a cubit long.  
For swollen with offspring, she journeys to the body’s surface.  
For she bides her time.  
For, where she lodges, a burning blister erupts.  
For the blister breaks and exposes her at its center.

I will witness the awful manner of her departing:  
For she prefers the legs or feet, but has been known to come forth from  
an eye or a tongue, from a testicle or a breast.  
For she reluctantly leaves her refuge, the warm labyrinth of the body.  
For if she is touched, she withdraws to its moist recesses.  
For she will emerge in water.  
For her young can survive only in water.  
For she impels the victim, maddened with pain, to plunge the ulcer in  
soothing water.  
For into the pond spills a vapor trail of a million milky spawn.

I will consider how the cycle begins again, and mark how it does not end.  
For having spawned, the dying worm must be drawn forth bit by bit.  
For it most resembles a bloodless vein, or a strand of boiled spaghetti.



For it can only be removed by winding slowly around a stick, like thread  
on a spool, lest  
it retreat again.  
For if the worm ruptures, a raging infection results.  
For its extraction takes weeks.  
For if all goes well, the victim lies bedridden for a month afterward.  
For the crops rot unpicked and the children go hungry.

I will marvel at how the worm's long history is intertwined with ours.  
For its calcified remains have been found tangled in the legs and lungs of  
Pharaohs.  
For it has been ferried by them unknowingly into the tomb, and the  
dimness of the afterlife.  
For it afflicted also the Egyptians' enemies.  
For the Israelites accosted Moses by the shores of the Red Sea.  
For they complained of having been brought from slavery into a  
wilderness without food or shelter.  
For they came to loathe the Lord's manna.  
For the Lord, in retribution, sent them a plague of fiery serpents.  
For many were bitten and died.  
For the survivors begged Moses to ask the Lord's forgiveness.  
For the Lord commanded Moses to hold up a staff with a serpent of  
brass, and those who looked upon it would live.  
For the Hebrew for "fiery serpent" is *saraph*.  
For *saraph* is the root of seraphim.  
For Satan, before he took the shape of a serpent, was among the seraphim.  
For if this scourge was created, it must surely have been by the design of  
Satan.  
For if by God, it is an argument against God's benevolence.  
For if not, it is a defiance against God's power.

I will praise the destruction of the Guinea worm, and exult in its exile  
from the earth.  
For at last mankind, without the power of miracles, has lifted his sword  
against it.  
For he now knows that it is not caused by the curse of an ancestor, or of  
God, or by drinking the blood of a goat, or by a confluence of  
the planets.  
For he has found the soft place in the dragon's belly.  
For he knows that it needs the water flea to breed, and without it is  
rendered harmless.  
For the fleas cannot pass through finely woven cloth.



For infested water can, by this remedy, be made clean again.  
For he has expelled the worm from India and Pakistan, from Senegal and  
Yemen, from Cameroon and Kenya, one village at a time.  
For he has battled fear, and suspicion, and hopelessness, and the jealousy  
of the local gods who guard the sacred wells.  
For the worm creeps nearer and nearer to extinction.  
For soon it shall no longer bite the heels of the children of men.  
For they shall drink without harm from the cups of their hands.

