



## The Hungers of the World: Poems From a Residency

John Morgan

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2009

John Morgan is the first writer in the Artist-in-Residence program. In 1976, he moved to Fairbanks to teach creative writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He has published four books of poetry:

*The Bone-Duster*  
*The Arctic Herd*  
*Walking Past Midnight*  
*Spear-Fishing on the Chatanika*

His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

**Denali Artist-in-Residence Program**  
Artists spend ten days at the historic East Fork Cabin exploring the park. From their experiences, they create an art piece that is then donated to the park collection.

[www.nps.gov/dena/historyculture/arts-program.htm](http://www.nps.gov/dena/historyculture/arts-program.htm)

Denali National Park and Preserve  
Artist-in-Residence Collection  
Catalogue # DENA-2009-01-26

*"Hungers of the World: Poems From a Residency" is a donated product of the Denali Artist-in-Residence program and does not reflect the opinion of the National Park Service.*

I had been to the park many times before, but this visit I felt from the start that something extraordinary was happening. Being “in residence” means, in a sense, being at home, and having the wonderful Murie Cabin to live in made me feel a part of the wilderness when-ever I stepped outside. These intimations culminated, toward the end of my stay, with the experience recounted in the poem “Vision.” The philosopher William James has written that one of the basic qualities of a mystical experience is that it cannot be captured in words. He may be right, but I felt I had to try. It was unlike anything that had ever happened to me before.

Most of the poems in “The Hungers of the World” are based on a journal that I kept during my 10 day stay. Two come out of earlier visits to the park. The forms used include free verse, accentual verse, and, in one case, a sonnet. I hope they begin to capture the range and suggest the impact my experiences had on me.

## **Acknowledgements**

“The Denali Wolf” first appeared in the magazine Ice-Floe and “The Unnamed Lake” was originally published in The Northern Journal.

I wish to thank Park Superintendent Paul Anderson, Ingrid Nixon, Chief of Interpretation, and Annie Duffy, Arts Coordinator for Alaska Geographic for making my residency possible. I am very grateful to Tom Walker for putting forward the idea of having writers spend time at the Murie Cabin. Also great thanks to my wife Nancy for suggesting the idea to Tom during a field journaling class we took with him in 2008.

## Arrival

*Denali National Park, 6-19-09*

Fourteen caribou at Sable Pass,  
pestered by a pair of long-tailed jaegers—  
bright barbs of ruckus, territorial,  
they swoop down like spear-heads,  
loop, wheel and shout.

While focusing 'binocs,' my  
elbow hits the horn and  
baffled by the blare,  
fourteen caribou stop dead and stare.

•

Perched in flinty stillness on  
the porch—cupped  
ears and stubby tail—a resident  
ground squirrel sizes me up.

•

These green and ochre hills  
dotted and streaked with white,  
backed by the snow-splashed  
peaks of Polychrome, shift  
in softening light.

•

While foxes den a hollow  
hillside by the river,  
magpies flit, a rabbit  
grazes and moves on.

•

Browsing the cabin's logbook,  
ten years of visitations,  
the tribute of one artist  
draws tears to my eyes: "It's  
as if you dropped me off in Paradise."

## **The Unamed Lake** **(from a field journal)**

*In memory of Charles Ott and William Ruth*

Slogged over tipsy muskeg, past a “moose  
wallow,” grizzly tracks, to reach this breeze-  
rippled lake, where, through waving horsetails,  
a golden-eye, her pesky offspring in tow,

preens and dives. Across the sky-flecked water, spruce,  
then tundra meadows mount toward jagged Zs  
of rock. Like specks of white-out, Dall sheep line  
the ridge. If this place had a name, it’s been

erased, in homage to two men whose ashes  
seed the hills nearby. They staked their lives  
on wildness beyond naming. Can we go back,  
reclaim the power of unaltered place? Blue  
and luminous, a damselfly lights on this page;  
two kingfishers weigh in, wheel off down the lake.

## Higher Powers

Scanned across the East Fork  
with binocs and on a distant ridge,  
that funny-looking rock's

a golden eagle, eyes fierce and  
head erect, bill hooked like some-  
thing Roman, regal, as two

more eagles circle in. Their  
wings straight on like wispy Vs,  
a child's scribbled wings, but

through a 60 power scope—  
unearthly things, Renaissance  
angels sifting toward the sun.

## The Denali Wolf

Near the East Fork of the Toklat  
in the season that's never dark  
I lugged my gear back from the road

and while I slept through dusk  
a noise like trash in the suburbs  
being clattered away woke me up.

When I stuck my head out of the tent flap  
the hoofed creatures were gone  
but what I saw at eye-level,

like a fury sculpted in ice  
brought me to my knees.  
Once I'd wanted to paint a canvas

some huge fanatical blue  
where the hungers of the world  
could settle and be soothed.

Ten feet away, ears pricked,  
nose flaring, the silver-gray  
pursuer stared me in the face,

then sensing I wasn't prey  
whirled off along the river,  
and I watched him shrink to a point

in imaginary time  
fleet as the fastest athlete  
I'd ever seen in my life.

## Day Six Journal

Woke to heavy rain, low clouds,  
the wet-rag sky wrung out  
with little hope for change. But hey—

it's the park. Let's go!  
And driving toward Eielson, the rain  
does change—to snow.

There on a hillside, a mother  
grizzly playing with her cub—  
delighted with each other

and by the frosty white,  
they roll and wrestle in it.  
At Eielson, a snowball fight

pits kids against the giddy bus  
dispatcher. We take a hike.  
And later hike again near

Stony Creek, noting a mound  
of grizzly scat beside  
a stretch of torn up ground

where the ravenous bear  
rummaged turf for  
ground squirrels—earth

gouged, mined, ripped, rocks  
tossed aside like  
ping-pong balls, a thorough

thrashing of the region.  
Wild nature on a tear  
alters our perspective (after

the playful grappling of  
mother and cub) on the crushing  
strength and menace of a bear.

## Vision

Followed a fox toward Polychrome.  
Red smudged  
with black along its lean rib-cage,

it rubs its muzzle on a former meal,  
ignores the  
impatient poet on its tail.

Then nearing the overlook, sun shearing  
through low clouds  
transmutes the view to glitter. Everything's

golden, scintillant. I feel like a seedpod wafted  
into space and  
check my shaky hands on the steering wheel.

As the road crests over its top, boundaries  
dissolve. Beside that  
sheer intractable edge, I greet my radiant center,

discharge all my terms. How easy it seems  
to channel between  
worlds, my old self dying into a new,

with nothing firm to hold me here  
but love. And that's  
what nature has it in its power to do.

## The Head

Nature, great creator, full  
of invention, fabrication.

Day ten, went for a good-by look  
to the bank of the East Fork, glacial

river, thick gray water. Suddenly  
a head pokes up. A fish, an

otter? There's no telling—  
barely seen, it vanishes.

Dream? Illusion? Was it  
just a mental bubble?

But then that same queer  
head pops up again, followed

by the long-necked mottled  
body of a duck. Duck in a panic,

flapping, paddling, launches  
a mad-dash for shore, and seems

about to make it when  
the silted channel swallows it again.