Tahlequah II\*

A newborn calf swims at your side,

dorsal fin erect,

white spots flushed

through tender skin.

After your loss,

after your epic tour of grief,

your enduring wait

has been rewarded.

Tahlequah, we long to rejoice–

but we hold our breath,

knowing that only half of orca infants

see their second year.

The very milk they drink

is laced with toxins,

a legacy of thoughtless human greed.

Yet your tribe gathers in welcome.

Converging from hundreds of miles around,

convened by understanding beyond our ken,

three pods reunite, filling the straits

with their joyous calling and cavorting–

porpoising, lobtailing, spyhopping,

breaching, splashing, rolling,

flinging and blowing sprays of sunlit water

in a grand, titanic celebration,

a brilliant, tumbling fusion

of sea, air, light, and life in motion.

Deborah Bachels Schmidt

\* *In 2018 the orca mother Tahlequah carried her dead calf for seventeen days and more than a thousand miles; the poem “Tahlequah I” is a response to that event.*