

Deborah Schmidt

## Tahlequah I

Beneath the northern stars, on the Salish Sea,  
a mother orca circles with her daughter,  
lifting her infant to the air, that she  
might breathe again. This baby, born to water,  
lived only minutes and has not drawn breath  
for days, yet still, yet still her grieving mother  
will not let go, cannot accept her death.  
This is a mother's vigil like no other,  
one day for each month of her pregnancy,  
a thousand-mile wake, a tour of grief,  
a crying out for us to feel, to see,  
to act at last on our inmost belief.  
Oh Tahlequah, whose name is like the water,  
we must do this for you and for your daughter.

Deborah Bachelts Schmidt

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.*