

Who Are You? Children?

PAINTINGS, POETRY, PROCESS AND POLITICS

BY JESSICA DAMEN



"Who Are You? Children?" Oil on Canvas, 48" x 62",
2002, In Private Collection.

The title to this painting "Who Are You? Children?" is a question I posed to myself after the horrific events of 9/11/01. My query came from my shattered illusion of the United States' invincibility. I felt like a child betrayed by my parents.

I began this painting early in September after my idyllic 2001 summer where I met my friend, poet and collaborator Maj Ragain at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown Massachusetts. A source image for the painting was a circa 1940's black and white photo. Three wonderstruck children are clustered together illuminated by brilliant light. As I studied this photo, I imagined their anticipation for a magical, playful day and I felt their glow from the illuminating light.

During the autumn of 2001 I was living about ten miles outside of Washington, DC in a pastoral neighborhood adjacent to an undeveloped meadow. While sitting in an Adirondack chair located on my back porch, I was conversing with a dear friend living in Florida.

She interrupted our conversation. "Sorry, I have to get off the phone. I just heard a small plane hit one of the World Trade Towers where Peter works."

Early news was naturally confused and the severity of the impact was minimized. Fortunately for Peter, my friend's son, his place of employment was below the point of impact. He survived by walking down innumerable stairs; past the falling victims and debris, straight north toward Harlem, while all the time responsibly carrying a heavy documentation book under his purview.

I turned on the television. All of the stations were covering what was believed to be an accident. As a commentator was theorizing about how a jet could fly into the North Tower, my husband, Rufus and →

The Ancient Ones at Trail's End by Maj Ragain
A companion poem "Who Are You? Children?"

We are not children.
We walked out of the wood's womb
before the first light.
We wait now at the edge of razor grass,
picketed by the wooden teeth fence.
Down the long narrow trails,
we linked hands, the five of us,
our legs kissed by summer,
poison oak, trumpet vine, nightshade.
In the clearing, we unraveled
into who we had always been,
the heavy bucket of the skull,
the noise in the chest, the hands
that long to fly away like
strange, knuckle-winged birds,
to call back to us from treetops.

I am the sighted one.
Only I can see what is coming for us.
Our flame headed sister has fired her
last musket ball at the wounded moon.
The beasts have found the breech in the fence.

This is the time we have feared.



I saw a jet steer directly into the South Tower. Twenty-six minutes later the Pentagon was attacked. Rufus and I were sitting, standing, pacing, and staring at the burning towers praying that most would be evacuated. Commentators didn't report that there were people jumping from the Towers' heights. We were holding hands when we saw the South Tower move. Within seconds it fell like an accordion compressed into plumps of dust and smoke.

Once in 1979, after finishing a celebratory lunch, I gazed down from the 107th floor of Windows on the World restaurant located in North Tower. Glass separated me from ant size cars more than a thousand feet below. Filled with vertiginous awe I stepped away. I calmed myself thinking the steel and glass would protect me. The brilliance of architects, engineers and makers of strong steel would keep me safe.

At 9:59 am, the South Tower's steel melted before my eyes and hundreds, perhaps thousands, perished. At 10:28 am the North Tower collapsed. From my sofa I fell to my knees and wailed, "so many dead."

No one saw the deaths of the brave Flight 93 passengers who tried to retake the plane from the hijackers. The World Trade Center Towers of New York were the ultimate symbol of US capitalism, the Pentagon of US military might and our democratic system, the Capitol. Our Capitol may have been destroyed that day, but for the bravery of the Flight 93 passengers.

George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 exceeding his slim and contentious win of 2000. The republic persevered, albeit more frightened and vengeful, but still capable of discourse, debate and fair elections. Until January 6, 2020, when a sociopathic liar, a bankrupt sore loser, a former NY real estate brander and old, flabby "playboy" used his skills as the consummate flimflam man to instigate a furious mob of his supporters into committing the second successful attack on the nation's capitol.*

We are now facing a new crisis; a not so slow moving Constitutional crisis, which began with the second successful sacking of Congress' Capitol. ✧

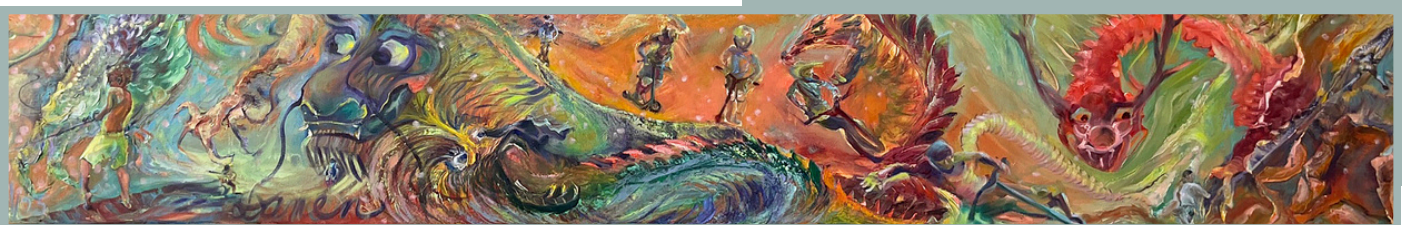
**August 24, 1814, a British army led by Major-General Robert Ross marched on Washington, D.C. That evening, British soldiers and sailors set fire to multiple public buildings, including the Presidential Mansion, United States Capitol, and Washington Navy Yard.*

Top: "Skating and Dancing With Dragons," Oil on Canvas, 15" x 113", oil on canvas, 2024

Bottom: "Approaching the Edge of the Dragon's Jaws," Oil on Canvas, 15" x 113", 2025

This series of paintings celebrate my grandchildren's love of skateboarding, dance, gymnastics, baseball, and fishing—they are embracing life. In Chinese mythology, dragons are a symbol of fortune, power and benevolence.

Creating artworks which celebrate the joy experienced by children is a poignant reminder of what will be lost if we "sleepwalk into political or climate catastrophe."





Left: Being interviewed by Jim Acosta (formerly of CNN, now on Substack, Live with Jim Acosta) after I had a discussion with a DOGE representative during a protest at the Department of Treasury on Feb. 4, 2025 (below.)

Rufus Lusk, my husband, has served on the Global Refuge President's Council since 2024. On day one of Donald Trump's administration, he commented, "The Trump/Musk/DOGE chain saw cutting of Global Refuge's funds is comparable to a huge corporation **stiffing a local supplier of money due for services already rendered...**

Global Refuge has been assisting legally vetted refugees since 1940 (previously as Lutheran World Relief). Now, the cutting of Congress' fully authorized funds forced this faith-based organization to lay off 80% of its staff and scramble to find private funds to do the services, such as assistance with housing, language classes, insurance—all services Congress had already authorized."

Transition and Glimmers of Hope

On February 19th I gave the kickoff presentation for **The Art of Seeing**. Although I am not a poet, I was invited to share with a group of college-aged writers how I engage poetry through visual art.

(Thank you to David Hassler, the Bob and Walt Wick Executive Director of the nationally known Wick Poetry Center, and Anderson Turner, the Director of Exhibitions and Collections at the School of Art, Kent State University.)

The purpose of my talk was to to set the stage for the students to compose ekphrastic poems working from a selection from the Kent State's permanent art collection. Students chose artworks with which they resonated. Somehow, I was to provide them with insights originating especially from the collaborative process I had established with poet Maj Ragain.

Maj and I often discussed our thoughts about art and how it influenced our lives, but never, did we specifically explain to each other, our respective artworks. I was confused about how to proceed but, since Maj could not speak for himself as he had passed away in April 2018, I dove into the murky waters seeking clarity that comes from reading someone else's mind. A skill I have never acquired.



And so, I began with this question: **what did Maj see in my painting that I had missed?**

Beginning with my question, "Who Are You?" and the accusation, "Children?" Maj responded with an emphatic, "NO. They are no longer children. They have walked out of the protected wood womb. Instead they are walking a dangerous poisonous trail together."

They walk the trail and the "beasts have... breech(ed) the fence". Maj warns, **"This is the time we have feared."** →

Only two months into the MAGA/MUSK administration, I have never felt so adrift and anxious. For me this is the time I have feared. Sometimes, I have trouble breathing and now appreciate sleep as a small wonder. Just as I watched the Towers fall in real time, I feel I am watching the beasts overrunning the institutions that once cushioned my sense of security.

There are so many breeches— of constructive community building such as, the destruction of USAID, Global Refuge, Catholic Charities, the former once providing exemplary soft diplomacy and the latter just two of the organizations that once assiduously helped *legal* immigrants navigate their new lives in the US. So many breeches— letting loose intrusive probes into private financial and personal data beginning with the US Department of Treasury, “Doggies” quickly moved onto the IRS, Medicare and Medicaid and are now using a pounding ramrod to breach the once secure wall of Social Security.

So many breaches of administrative functions— firing capriciously and then perhaps rehiring personnel, cancelling leases, cancelling fully authorized green technology projects. These Beasts are viruses infiltrating every aspect of our government that have provided for the common good. The Beasts are unqualified, ideologically driven Secretaries. The Beasts attack lawyers and firms who dare to defend the other, judges who dare to interpret law according to the Constitution, journalists who dare to ask pointed questions and follow up with cogent analysis. This is just the beginning of the breeches.

Get involved. If you are interested in a nationwide action located in different places visit [Indivisible](#) (QR code), [Hands off!](#), or [Swing Left](#).

For older individuals who are particularly concerned about global climate change visit [Third Act](#).



Detail of "Our Mothers' Repose: Kali and Persephone," Oil on Canvas, 76" x 80", 2023

The Beasts started with breaking norms, denying women their right to choose, attacking minorities and migrants delighting in their gas lighting and rejection of decency.

But what the beasts have not yet comprehended is that amongst the ridiculed “woke libs” are sleeping giants. She is the strength of Artemis, the woman who saw Actaeon eaten by his own dogs, a hunter torn apart by his disobedience. He is Shiva willing to lie down before Kali’s destructive path. She is also Kali with her sword and garland of skulls, a formidable raw force ready to initiate the eternal cycle of creation and destruction whose one aim is to save mother earth for her children, grandchildren and untold generations. She, he or whoever is one of the millions who are pissed off with their delegated second-class status. **They are the grassroots.** ✧