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AND OTHER ADVENTURES AMONG BATS, PENGUINS, CROCODILIANS, AND WHALES

DIANE ACKERMAN

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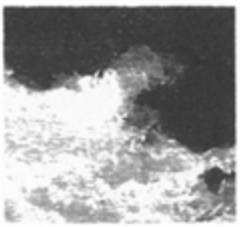
The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral

Diane Ackerman
THE MOON BY WHALE LIGHT

Diane Ackerman was born in Waukegan, Illinois. She received her B.A. from Pennsylvania State University and an M.F.A. and PhD. from Cornell University. Her poetry has been published in many leading literary journals, and in the books *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral* (1976), *Wife of Light* (1978), *Lady Faustus (*1983), *Reverse Thunder: A Dramatic Poem* (1988), and *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems* (1991).

Her works of nonfiction include, most recently, *A Natural History of Love* (1994); *The Moon By Whalelight and Other Adventures Among Bats, Crocodilians, Penguins, and Whales* (1991); *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990); and *On Extended Wings* (1985), a memoir of flying. She is at work on a second book of nature writings, *The Rarest of the Rare.*

Ms. Ackerman has received the Academy of American Poets' Lavan Award, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, among other recognitions. She has taught at several universities, including Columbia and Cornell, and she is currently a staff writer for *The New Yorker.*



THE MOON BY WHALE LIGHT

And Other Adventures Among Bats, Penguins, Crocodilians, and Whales

DIANE ACKERMAN

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For my parents,
Marcia and Sam

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INTRODUCTION

For a month in 1989 I sailed around Antarctica, a landscape as sensuous as it is remote, whose crystal desert I had wanted to see for a long time. Some months earlier I helped raise baby penguins in quarantine at Sea World in San Diego. One fluffy brown yeti-shaped chick, which I became particularly fond of, I named Apsley, after Apsley Cherry-Garrard, who in 1911 trekked across Antarctica, and wrote a vivid and poignant book about it, *The Worst Journey in the World*. For two years, I had been writing natural-history essays for *The New Yorker*, the magazine that sent me to see and write about penguins in the wild. To be haunted by the ghostly beauty of pastel icebergs and astonished by the Antarctic's vast herds of animals is an experience few people have ever known or will ever know, and I felt privileged—and still do. Not so long ago—in the days of Sir Richard Burton, T. E. Lawrence, D. H. Lawrence, Lady Hester Stanhope, Beryl Markham, Herman Melville, Washington Irving, and others—there was a crossroads where physical and literary adventure converged. There is also a long history of the bards called nature poets, and this brimming category includes writers as different as Lucretius and Marvell. But my prose now seems to locate me among a small tribe often referred to as nature writers. How curious that label is, suggesting as it does that nature is somehow separate from our doings, that nature does not contain us, that it's possible to step *outside* nature, not merely as one of its more promising denizens but objectively, as a sort of extraterrestrial voyeur. Still, the label is a dignified one, and implies a pastoral ethic that we share, a devotion to the keenly observed detail, and a sense of sacredness. There is a way of beholding nature that is itself a form of prayer.