

ALBATROSS



“God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends that plague thee thus!—
Why lookst thou so?”—With my crossbow
I shot the ALBATROSS.

ALBATROSS

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Bristlecone Pine

On the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada
a stand claws its existence from granite fissures.

At my high school the bristlecone was anathema,
older than Jesus, than even Jehovah. Evolution

was dismissed with a joke: California proscribed
two semesters for six days' work. Methuselah

trees, five thousand years old, but our teacher
explained, the trees in the Garden were created

with rings, just as Adam and Eve were adults,
a subtle ploy to explain La Brea Tar Pits

and rocks four billion years old. This fossil fir,
Pinus longaeva, failed to debunk Creation,

its truth lost among crude comments and gestures,
the lingua franca of adolescent boys. Reproduction

among mammals was meant to be divine,
another chapter skipped, a miracle unexplained

by the book left on my pillow. The bristlecone
grows but a few millimeters per year,

a thin fiber of persistence
unconcerned with the image of God.

Bristlecone Pine, The Oldest Living Thing on Earth

I.

Also known as foxtail pine
because of soft and pretty youthful bark,
you have lived five thousand years,

Alpha One, Methuselah tree,
a many-thousand-year-old mother's careless spawn;
now charted in the Forestry Service records,

you mark the land,
unmerited fame achieved
by nothing more than holding on.

Wind-dropped by chance past U.S. 395,
past the old mining trail
meandering beyond the ruins

of a wooden tollbooth,
past the foothills up to Cedar Flat,
past the place where the dirt road forks,

up the left-hand path
for more than eleven-thousand feet,
there you arrived

where a rocky outcropping
caused the wind to rise abruptly,
lose its force, drop you, a tiny cone,

where you wedged in a rocky cleft
and did your work,
that is, grew old.

II.

Young in our southwestern desert
when Assyrian kings ruled Babylon,
when you had grown

for fourteen hundred years,
a Pharaoh ordered pyramids.
Another thirteen hundred years.

The Christ was born and died.
A thousand more.
Crusaders liberated old Jerusalem
and disappeared into recorded history.
The whole sad, bloody world,
sometimes a little love,
was born, roared, sank back into the earth,
slipped backward, gained a little.
For some time, you added layers of bark,
sucked nutrients from that grudging soil,
then asked less, grew bent and twisted
in the icy wind, but managed to live,
if what you had was living, giving up trunk,
branches, leaves, vitality, losing ground each decade, century,
making deals to stay alive.

III.

Now mostly dead,
only a narrow strip of living cells
connects your roots to a few leafy births,
our old tree clinging to this world,
no matter what the cost. Those who stand
beside you for their photograph
memorialize a freak show,
foxtail pine no more.
You gave up being a tree
when you chose life above all else.
Now only one small branch
puts forth some cones
available for windy distribution.
You still give birth
like a pregnant Dachau woman,
survived the years by shutting down,
not growing bark, learning to live without.
Now you're no more a tree

than a mummy's human. Do you need us to help,
shut down that fragile layer of sucking cells,
call lightning down?

IV.

If I'd been given your part to play,
for a couple of thousand years
stayed smooth and rounded,

a body bursting forth
in far-flung human beings,
it might have been a compensation

for a rooted life to think I'd peopled earth.
Still, when I'd grown
a crumbling, bone-bound living death,

what horror a feeding tube
down my throat, a lifeline down my body,
keeping my womb alive,

to offer the world
a fat and laughing child each year.
I'd hope for help,

some Bunyan to bring his chainsaw,
torch me down. Yet some will say,
life's sacred where you find it,

Dachau woman, foxtail pine.
That feeding tube snakes down from Heaven,
they'll say, the decision isn't in your gift.

How hard a choice, old tree.
Bristlecone, shall I stand silent back
and let you play at life?

Shall I play God and tell them where to find you, Alpha?
Better, I think, to make you phoenix, foxtail,
send runners with a torch and set you free.

January Thaw

Such richness! So many columns against the snow!
The saplings; the silver birch by the pond; the white birch grove.
Under stripped bark, their flesh
shows bright yellow, gold.

The trees
do not blame or pray. They do not weep
over lost marriages, jobs, children. Theirs
is the pure present.

And you—
to what are you present? To
the ice cracking? The snow's thudding as it falls?
It creaks underfoot, compacting, cornstarch-dry.

And now
comes the white shower sifting down in the sunlight,
ticking onto the brush below.
The tangle of branches before you.
Pods of snow blossoming on each twist and curve.
The spring of branches as they let go their burden.

Coming Back After a Long Spell Away

Does the place remember the person, too?
It would be a comfort
to know the tree
remembers each leaf
long after its season.

That the millions mothered
under the lilies
launch into the frog galaxy,
each with its given name,
the one that signifies
this life and no other.

The Front Bedroom

for our friends at The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee

For fun, we had our wine
in fairy cups, green-glass and old—
ones they'd brought with them
to this old, old house.

And we sat on the steps
and saw a streak of green in the sunset.
It was autumn, though. Maybe
it was smoky gold

above the mountain—old Wayah,
named for wolves long gone. They said
I'd be sleeping in the oldest
part of the house.

Out back, the pines went black,
and, lighted, gathered inside, we turned
our talk to neighbors—an old man
whose wife laughed

when he spoke to them
of little people and of the others, the ones
from under the ancient mounds.
We laughed.

In bed, in the dark,
I saw the first light—outside, I thought,
but knew I was looking at the wall:
a greenish—

white light dying
in the glass of a picture frame,
deep in the dark of my startled head.
I turned to face the room.

Near the ceiling, it moved
and was gone, then came again. Out
of bed, I pulled a curtain back
and saw it behind me,

in front, in the window glass
like a little moon. There was no moon,
but I saw a river—what is its name
in the old tongue?—

a moving, wide river
in moonlight bright enough to burn
the dark world green.

Survivors

Row after row of exotics
in the steamy nursery, and the soil
under our feet muddy
from the morning's warm watering.
It was some Michigan town,
the kind with a single stoplight
and a glass house where we found
euphorbia, opuntia, agave,
and the fleshy arms of succulents
out of Namibia or Natal.

Marching under banners,
vociferous in the waiting-rooms
of senators and assemblymen,
pouring words into the mouths
of insatiable computers,
we sometimes forget
those small back roads in Michigan
and their acres of greenhouse,
aisle after aisle
with the shadowy grafts of moonflowers,
the stout forms of elephant hooves,
all of their truths and convictions
burgeoning in the damp earth,
and the way we grew
larger among them, loving more.

Victory Garden

Now, when trains pass through our town
it is always at night, their warning forever
in that minor key that falls adagio
except the final note, a question,
swinging so slightly and timidly upward.
Hearing them, it is easy to be home again,
and everywhere we get news of surrenders.
It is autumn and we glean the garden's final yield
then pull up by roots the tendrils of summer,
everything dry enough and willing
to let go—softening vines of squash,
cucumber, even the trumpet flowers, all
the sprawling growth of our hope, loosening its hold
on our plot of earth. This is how we wait
for our brother's return, for our turn at the depot.
We have found again some shape to the world.
All summer we let the heat have us, let
it turn us red and freckled and finally brown
for we are impervious to small dangers now
and our garden ripens recklessly to harvest.
This is how we come to that afternoon
the Milwaukee blares its melancholy
into our ears: young victors
greeting warriors we imagine whole and perfect
and sun-drenched like us, and when the bounty
of soldiers spills onto the platform, we join
the mass of arms waving, reaching
to gather them in.

Sabbatical

Just days into your absence and the hours
are long. Still, it's only a small sadness.
Every living thing here knows what autumn
is about and also this singular day.

I know just as the tallgrass knows,
that whole field giving in together,
browning and bending to
old familiar rhythms.

I know just as the earth knows
to prepare for the distancing of the sun,
to slow and close into itself.

Today two snow geese, from a distance
dark, perfect arrows, broke
formation and settled onto our pond.
All day they've folded into
themselves as though they would stay
on forever, fashioning wakes clear
as etchings on the water's surface.

There are no hard edges to this day.
Every living thing knows of endings,
how they turn and all moves on.
Who would know how to live forever,
together, here, in days like this.

Wake

The sun has not yet broken
the horizon where clouds leak a mean lavender
of half dawn where, like a beetle stuck in sap,
I wait for the space around me to harden
a golden amber.
I want to believe in animal perspective,
to linger in the early hours slipping into sleep,
stars setting into a wash of ebbing patterns.
It was never supposed to be like this:
the silence of the first bird waking,
but I could imagine it:
where the flesh goes—
the earth that seemed so solid
groaning beneath it all before giving over
to human voices on the radio.
Some mornings it gets harder to wake,
though an awareness of being asleep is there
telling us to wake up, you are dreaming,
you must wake up, and I am sure I will die,
wings scudding on the air, the small hollow
bones splintering on the ground—not my bones,
not even a memory of their marrow—
disoriented, waking as if into a room
I am not used to sleeping in,
of walking towards the wall
where I swear there had been a door.

How To Be Where You Are

Forget what the field guide tells you.

That titmouse peter-peter-peter
is speaking your name
even if it's Andrew.

The warblers whistle
what your reflection
would look like
if your ears were faces
and the trees,
lake surfaces.

A flock of geese high overhead
honk southward with your dreams.

And fear not the rustle in the brushes.
It's just those parts of yourself
fearful of other parts.

No need to testify to each wing,
every flash of fur, or even
tall, hardy trunks,
as if you were cataloguing
the death in all that's living.

Two Families

One family we all know, or almost
all—the one where everyone
has thumbs and eyelids, where blood
is deeper than water, and the tongue
is for speaking: lovers and mothers,
the indoor family warm and round
as a pigeon's egg, soft
as a grey down feather,
the people we love, at least
when we are not pecking
each other's eyes, bleeding
from the breast of comfort.
But there's another too.
Outside the featherbed of love
and speech is the fierce-
patterned wide-skyed place
where the speaking tongue licks
and tastes, and tastes
blood and hair. There
the sun speaks the whole only
world, and the fox
and the quail are kin,
and blood kin, and so even are we.
If you go out tonight while the moon walks
over the mountains, where the dark
is not safe, where the other family
would allow you now, the owl
and the mouse are speaking
together in the way you know we hear.

Grace

Are you tongue-tied then,
and have you
nothing to give thanks for?
Study. Look. Listen
to the blood. Have you forgotten
this one miracle? Notice
the rabbit in the field; sun;
blue sky. Blades
of timothy. The cold
sweet clover.
The hawk's shadow sliding
over the grass, and gone.

Morning Dove

You have taken the windowsill as yours.
Ferried here thin limbs of the elm tree
between this apartment building and the next.
You have made your choices.
Now you sit in this dark, late grip of winter
waiting for your part in morning's song, soon to come
humming through this cold stillness.

Your black eyes reflect the moon like
planets of opaque glass.
Like the light itself is your nightmare.
Sing a bar each of love and fear before
the sun steals your audience. Sing so I will
recognize them, finally, in the dark.

*

I hover motionless at the window where
half a nest sits frayed over stone.
Except for a soft percussion of wings
the world is silent in prayer.
The sun locks the weight of
deep space above its shoulders.
Pins darkness between its own
gravity and the orange fire below.
The trees' leaves hold their notes like a choir.

I wait for the dove to return to her sill.
Wait to ask forgiveness
until there is a voice that might be understood.

Apache Orioles

The Apache love the Scott's oriole
which inhabits their oak and juniper scrublands
just where the mountain slopes
begin to rise;
ascending towards the heavens.
These black and yellow feathered friends
are believed to be the happiest of birds;
they always sing good,
never fight,
and mind their own business.
It is always good with that bird.
During the Naichee ceremony
oriole feathers are given to the young girl,
so that she too
will have a good disposition.
It is a lesson
everyone should learn.

Poet Role-Playing

For the Record, my name is Senator Perrin. This morning finds me on Capitol Hill interviewing Mister X from the Private Sector, the choice of the White House to head the Environmental Protection Agency, at his Confirmation Hearing.

Mister X, would you tell us, please, about your most recent encounter with a hermit thrush?

Did its cantabile stop you in your forest tracks?

Did you think: I want this web to weave for ever?

Did you face the vibrations and whisper: Ear serum—tilt and pour—pour—keep pouring toward me?

Then sweet—talk it thus: Pierce and pierce green thicknesses from your cloistered inch of throat my eye will likely never chance on?

Did you grow rhapsodically vocative, addressing it as Liquid Opal—flow?

Before requesting: Draw me in your ambit, as into a proverb's truth by which I'll then be governed?

Did you marvel: See how with sound alone you stop the beat of noon—heat's world?

Did you flatter it, effusing: I lean here powerless, a citizen of breathing stone?

Adding: Phrase me phrase me time then time then time again?

Or: Ear nectar—steep my hearing—prolong me—well me—claim me?

Or: Let all our pursuits be chained with your bright links?

No further questions.

A Sand Lily in Spring

Through this winter I have waited for desert flowers
to come bursting through dust, faces turned to sky.
I have been searching especially
for the sand lily, a bead of light so rare
that one must hold its cream petals
in the eyes as long as they last;
some things in life are fragile
and short-lived as the dawn.

Today I found them quite by surprise,
and seeing them, thought of you;
like these tiny blooms in the dust,
you spoke to me from a gentle place
in the landscape of your life. Listen:
a glance from your eyes, a touch on my arm
is enough to inspire me for days.

While the sun conspired in silence
to melt the snow into warmth,
I sang for you each morning until the clouds wept
sweet rain to cool this dry, thirsty land;
and when the patient sky cleared, I watched
mountains bloom like roses in morning light.

One day while writing, I listened to gusts of air,
my hands nervous as trees in wind;
I imagined my dreams arriving as an assembly
of spring butterflies on the crest of a great wave,
the way the breath caresses a word
like now or life or yes.

I see a mountain bluebird in a tree
and think of something I saw in you that day,
a shimmering flake of impending summer sky
or the play of light beneath the surface
of a clear, slow-moving stream.

These moments are flowers so delicate
I must approach them on my knees.
We will only live in these bodies but once,
so I must speak these things while I can:
for the sake of a single lily I have found,
I will open my hands to the world.

Summons

And I have known summers of water and fire.
Hills in dreamed light, winds like stone.
A sun like a great poem of origin.

The most of these moods is a blue sky.
Uneven pictures, quality of love in the desert.
Perhaps this next day will bring magic to the flowers.

The rains came in the night this year.
Mirrors of deceit, my candle burns low.
I spend days with books and reflections,
watching my new kitten in the courtyard.
Windows like bells, the songs seem a constant.

Once upon the sea I watched the great birds
and danced with pretty girls.
The sea, a reminder of youth and freedom.
Knowledge came about that way,
stars over the harbor like imagined tomorrows.
The language was strong, my eyes believing in words.
The eyes say more than love, than time.

Then one day the sun rose
beyond men of the mountains.
I had fallen asleep in the desert.
But the light touched only one heart.
And swift clouds crossed over Orion
like some farthest shore.
Then the winds from Eden were sweet and wild.

Hawksbill

She sinks slowly
her beryl and pistachio dissolving
into the cobalt around her.
But near the last, when she is just
a dotted line
a double exposure,
those finned feet flicker,
her head stretches eager,
and she's vanished,
wild to be rid of me
and my lumbering, time-tallying ways.

She can go for as long as a year
without coming up for air.

We touch where we can,
aware that others believe
we should not even catch sight of each other
much less curl into trust.
But the meaning must have been there
all along, a rhythm in the chaos
that is itself irregular,
reproduced perhaps by combining
Pacific plate swells
and ursine winter heartbeat.

We've joined,
and suddenly thousands of other languages
are dialing up from babble into creole,
a new music in my everyday.
I grub through my books,
attend gatherings, sleep hard
but a filament of me is tracking
always tracking
her chilled air-filled sufficiency
circling the globe's currents.

So Much to Learn About a Simple Fish

And I never did. I let silence sit
between us, and where the child
was content, or let her eager voice
spill, not requiring an answer, the grown
daughter believed she had to fill
pauses with meaning, pull concern.
But the pause was meaning, was
the lesson. I didn't hear.

I should have asked him about trout.
I could have learned. The awful numbers
life required, the need for joining
and death, the vigilance
to what would sustain. And beauty
in design, as the fish sees reflected
light and cannot see what lies precisely

before it. He studied, learned
what was needed. To step in a river
to his hips and know how to stand.
A life's work, to be perfect in this
one thing. A thing to be done alone.
That required silence. The seizure
of what is free. The letting go.

North Atlantic

I could picture you in a parrot-friendly
paradise and how you would only live in
a shack comprised of palm fronds,
romanticizing the hell out of the situation.

You would send me coconuts and little
vials of sand and tell me how you have
friends named Ralph and Piggy. Every day
I would pull out piles of postcards from my
mailbox and read about the unbelievable
weather, the dolphins that are bi- and
tri-lingual, and the mermaids singing
each to each and on and on.

You really must think you live in
some place invented by Jimmy Buffett
in the middle of a margarita marathon.

And that is why
most of the time, your life and mine
resemble uncanny crosswinds and barometric
readings that nosedive out of control—

a North Atlantic season that is unashamed
of the way it turns little rowboats over
and delivers humpback whales belly-side up.

Reading About the Larsen Ice Shelf While Pregnant

Satellite photos show the Antarctic peninsula,
a graceful white spine in a dark ocean,
curled like the fetus I carry. Satellite photos
show the Larsen B crumbling away.

Ice twelve thousand years old, ice
six hundred feet thick, adrift, melting,
gone. Scientists rush urgently together:
geologists, climatologists, glaciologists.

Little One, when you are done floating
in amniotic waves, you will come out,
but not to toddle, as your Mama did,
with dry feet on firm, reliable ground.

Born from a hot wet womb to a world
hot with change, tossed by unknown waters,
as uncertain as this, my meager blessing:
may you have sea legs. Ride the coming flood.

Contributor's Notes

Jessie Brown received her Master's degree from the Stanford Writing Program, where she won the American Academy of Poets prize. Her poems have appeared in local forums and her translations in THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW. She lives in Arlington, MA and works as a poet-in-residence in Boston-area schools.

E.G. Burrows lives in Edmonds, WA. He has current and recent appearances in IOWA REVIEW, CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY, SOUTH DAKOTA REVIEW, SLANT, and others. He has previously published in ALBATROSS.

Catherine Carter is currently a visiting professor at Western Carolina University. Her work has appeared in POETRY, NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW, COMSTOCK REVIEW, and others, and her full-length manuscript, THE MEMORY OF GILLS, was recently accepted by LSU Press and will be published in 2006.

Kate Chadbourne lives in Lunenburg, MA. Her work has appeared in SALT HILL, THE БЕЛОIT POETRY JOURNAL and CORACLE, among others.

Eric Elliott graduated from the University of Toledo in 2003 where he majored in writing. His work has appeared in WHIRLIGIG and THE SUSQUEHANNA REVIEW.

Gary Every lives in Oracle, AZ.

Cheryl Gatling is an RN in Syracuse, NY. She has had poems published most recently in WILLOW REVIEW and COMSTOCK REVIEW, and forthcoming in MAIN STREET RAG.

John Grey is an Australian born poet, playwright, and musician. He has recent work in MALAHAT REVIEW, BELLEVUE LITERARY REVIEW, and ECLIPSE and his latest book is WHAT ELSE IS THERE from Main Street Rag. His work has previously appeared in ALBATROSS.

Michael Hardin is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Susquehanna University. He has had poetry appear recently in THE SENECA REVIEW, CONNECTICUT REVIEW, BIRMINGHAM POETRY REVIEW and has poems forthcoming in CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY and TEXAS REVIEW.

Sean Patrick Hill lives in Bend, OR and teaches high school in nearby Redmond. He has taught poetry classes and workshops and written for a weekly paper in Bend called THE SOURCE. He has published in such journals as MANZANITA QUARTERLY, THE DRAGONFLY REVIEW, and FIREWEED.

Maggie Jochild of Austin, TX received the 2002-03 Loving Lesbians Poetry Award from the Astraea Lesbian Writer's Fund. She is a creative writing workshop facilitator for the FINDING VOICES PRODUCTION SERIES. Recent and pending publication credits include POETRY MOTEL, PEDESTAL, AMERICAS REVIEW, and various anthologies.

Amanda Passmore lives in Hollidaysburg, PA where she teaches part-time at Pennsylvania State University, Altoona College. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Vermont College.

T.P. Perrin has recently published in THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL, THE LYRIC, THE SOW'S EAR POETRY REVIEW, and others, as well as in various online journals.

Robert Reddinger is the editor of THE CHIMES, a literary publication of Geneva College. He also helps in the Humanities department of the college and enjoys hiking, fishing, and reading. He lives in Grantville, PA.

Tree Riesener has published fiction and poetry in the USA, Scotland, and England. Several stories have been dramatized; she has received a double first at the Philadelphia Writers Conference, a Hawthornden Fellowship and the William Van Wert Fiction Award. In 2002 she was also a semi-finalist in the Pablo Neruda Competition. She lives in Wayne, PA.

Don Russ has published in POETRY NORTHWEST, POET LORE, TAR RIVER POETRY, CONNECTICUT REVIEW, and many other periodicals in this country and in Canada and England. He has recently retired from the graduate writing program at Kennesaw State University.

Dana Thu was born in North Dakota, grew up in southern Iowa, and now lives in Indio, CA. He joined the army in 1976 and worked at the National Security Agency in signals intelligence. He has appeared in AVOCET and in POETALK, among others.

Marlene VanderWiel has had work published in BRIAR CLIFF REVIEW, IOWA WOMAN, SEAMS, and KIOSK. She is a former high school English instructor and librarian. Her husband and she live on 10 acres of Iowa prairie in the Loess hills of western Iowa.

Kelley Jean White studied at Dartmouth College and Harvard Medical School and has been a pediatrician in inner-city Philadelphia for more than twenty years. Her poems have been widely published over the past three years, including several book collections and chapbooks, and have appeared in numerous journals including NIMROD, POET LORE, RATTLE, and JAMA.

And I had done a hellish thing
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow!

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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