

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

CONTENTS

Katherine Angus	3
C.C. Russell	4
Becky Dennison Sakellariou	5
Dana Thu	7
Caleb Brooks	8
Nadine York	9
Ed Davis	10
Adrie Lester	11
Kate Nuernberger	12
Jeannine Dobbs	13
Sara Moore	14
Carol Motsinger	16
Jack Cooper	17
Jim Bill	18
Teresa Breeden	19
Monty Jones	20
Bill Freedman	22
Phong Nguyen	23
Brad Buchanan	24
Andy Roberts	25
Josh Hanson	26
John Grey	28
David O'Brien	29
Alice D'Alessio	30
Contributor's Notes	31

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17

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Signs and Wonders

I found a playing card in the street today:
the King of Spades dirt-spattered, torn.
I picked him up, smoothed him out
and he's coffined in my pocket now. Probably,
this is not a sign
of a new lover slightly damaged or a return from the past
or of anything at all. Probably, there are no gods
under the bark of trees, debonair as midnight
at the crossroads, hair undulating
like seaweed below the waves.

But what else can we do? If there is a bite
behind the lover's kiss, then why not loaves and fishes? Why
not gods who live in rivers and in rocks? Why not find
some sort of meaning in detritus, why not decipher messages
in the refuse on the ground?

Another friend is moving to the East Coast
to teach at a monastery. Do they beekeep,
I keep asking her. I need this image:
monks in long brown robes
hunched over the hives, a soft summer haze,
fields alight with lavender,
and the air around us breathing, numinous with bees.

If You're Reading This, Years Later

It's true that most of it
was intentional.

Remember the light that day
on the shore?
 – calendar light
like God's fingers
reaching back to us.

It is true that most things
were intentional.

But still, the sharp pangs
of shock
at the beauty
we contained.

Wild Asparagus

He saw her sleeping, her feet in rubies,
dandelions. Her body whirled, a cone of light. Later,
a bluebird turned white, dogs gathered in her bed,
oak saplings yawned at the night sky. He called
her name in a song, he became her house.

The night sword pierced her ribs with sheaves
of desire. Afraid, he summoned the galaxy,
gravity, the horizon, all unaccounted matter.
Liquid seeped from bundles of roots; she slept on,
betrothed to the planets. He wept.

She awoke with cherry stones in her palms, the glass
suddenly clear, blue walls fanning out
into the moist air, the dogs gone. Wild asparagus
had climbed over the walls, green diamonds
too sharp to touch. His head was on her pillow.

*When all the trees stand still as dead people,
will you take me to the sea?*

—Michael Cullen, 2 years old

Spring rain spits through the air, lifting
my hair, your collar. We bend to finger
tiny wild strawberries, you place one
in my mouth, its terrible sweetness opening
and opening, a heart unable to close.

We walk to the sea, a March blackness
where souls are born, empty and die,
rising through silver troughs. Rocks
lie against each other, make no song,
we stop, lean down for something
in the sand, straighten, go on.

Tomorrow, a child will take our hands, lace
the fingers together, look in our eyes and run
across the fields shouting. We will build a rock garden
around the strawberry plants, be gentle
with the tiny buds, the rain will stop
as we close the shutters. The child will not return for supper.

At dusk, a tree will stand still as a bone. It watches
through the night for those who may die, for those
who are lost, who have forgotten their children.
We pause at the doorway, palms flat,
waiting for the song, the sky
to open up and sing us in.

Liberation

It is true the character of the trees
joins the sky, strange at a distance
but familiar and green to the dreaming eye.
The flowers are as they seem,
bright and knowledgeable, a festival.
It is certain that the days are
more fragrant than wine, a light
like a sapphire from the arc of dawn.

The coffee colored hills are here,
the garden of the golden trees is here;
we are each telling stories
to our fathers, they know the mist of stars,
they know the way the child grows.
A balance of cedar and meadow
against a sharp background of dark blue sky.

It is enough to be human again
after the long century of creatures and poets.
A history written in madness,
each glimmer and this trace of lamp black.

But nothing replaces the intent of trees,
now solemn and ice trimmed.
I have found there is much to love:
ice skates, meridian skies, yellow tulips,
the way a sorrel pony grazes near
the hills in a California sunset.
Remarks of a priest on Epiphany
on the supreme gifts of the magi.

Here is little faith and the turn of the wheel.
Here is the promise to unmask mountains
and see woodlight and this tender portion
of hands gathering love and dreams.

The Mesquite Tree Speaks

Night in the Highveld,
the creaking of a tree:

Always and forever they formed
in one direction,
bent
with constant force.

Ntata, tell me how
they change.
Can I too
learn the strength
to grow against the wind?

Nadine York

Pinocchio Alchemy

April is poetry month at the library
Write a poem the sign invites
Hang it on the tree

I incant

Tree of poets
with hollow plastic trunk
may each poem's magic
shift the balance
 plastic to wood
 plastic to life
transform landfills
to lush forests

Live Oaks

Perhaps they're the souls
of ancient chieftains, rising
from the sandy loam.
Their hearts forever hardened.

Or, dressed for the afterlife,
Creek warriors maybe,
with arms outstretched,
spears, clubs and tomahawks

held aloft. Dancers,
forever lapsed
in some archaic rhythm.
Their green rattles still shaking.

The Maple

Making love,
the blue walls of our bedroom fall away
like the sky.

Once, we walked to our room
with a storm blowing at our backs,
and slid into bed as wind
slapped the window and flattened the grass below us.
We fell asleep in the downpour.

Now, knowing our perfection,
I do not trust even
the moonlight on the maple
to keep us safe.

The Fox

Of course I thought of you
when I saw him—
the blue-grey fox waiting in the frosted grass
for my car to move on
so that he could cross the road.
Thought how greedy I am—
I want and want—
and, amazingly, I have been given everything
I ever wanted.

The fox and I watched each other,
and when I passed he ran across
to the next field of corn stumps.
I thought of him all day,
holding him behind my eyes
until I could tell him to you,
could say that somehow
I am given even
what I have not thought
to ask for.

Dipper

I am not like you,
oiled feathers slicking water away
as you dive under ice.

In autumn you were elusive—
too small in the trees—now quick-footed
star of the white river

you are ambivalent
to personification. Aloof, I might call you,
or mysterious, because I

am not like you. Busy
with water bugs you would never
wonder why it is

the whole world
is mysterious even when it is all strutting
guileless through the snow.

Snow Flurries

I hate the way they pretend
to be daisies
stick to my boots
dull slugs
when all the time they'd rather be
in London
rare
and pleasing
ladies

A few try dying
like swans
they haven't the bones for it

yet collectively
they are credible
can stop the hive
can build
to that improbable
white climax.

A Natural Affliction

The morning,
the winter,
mid-afternoon,
the snow in pellets,
and the whites of your shoes
cast shadows
on a lake
that is green
like maidenhair fern,
green
like tea,
red like
Chinese oak,
red like a moon,
like snow
in pellets
and the whites of your shoes.
There is a pink alpine
violet, orchids
thick as mustard,
shoe print after shoe print after shoe print
with no pause
no breath
no red light district
no breath,
and it is
far
too
cold.

It's dark out.
The cats
in the yard
look like plums.
Come inside,
sing something
that smells like June,
like snow in pellets,
whites of shoes.
Sing something
blue as blue
ginger, with
more blossoms
than a bottlebrush tree.

Sing
something
your mother sang,
harsh,
out of tune
like snow in pellets
and white
white
white
shoes.

Midnight,
you plant
woolly nightshade
in the carpet,
in the pavement wounds,
in the pellet snow
and your white, white shoes.
I
eat
seeds
that pop
like parades,
that explode
in a flume,
that shiver
like snow,
like whites
and blues,
and it is far too cold
for anything to bloom.

You: A Mountain

When the snow melts
I am ready
to be cool water
slipping,
softening hard places.

Clumsily, I subdue you—
your mountainous knots
smoothed beneath
my missteps, my fluid fall:

We'll make caves.
And we'll travel, travel.

Wouldn't It Be Nice

In the bowels of brown February
green is a state of mind
as in wouldn't it be nice
to have grass under the big elm tree

when it leafs out on the shelf
of concrete bones and thistles
at the end of the lot?
You could sit outside with your flute

and float melodies in the wind,
birds swooping down
to ride the thermals
of your imagination.

I could take my drawing pad
and fashion a city of pinks and blues
without the stench of the corner grill,
the growl of traffic,

the race against yesterday.
And wouldn't it be nice
if somehow the concrete barriers
of class and race in the world

were removed at the same time
and the noxious weeds
of hunger and greed
replaced at long last

by the gentle green
law of abundance?
Of course, green starts out as brown,
brown being a very different state of mind

as in wouldn't it be nice
if we had a few bags of manure
and rolls of sod on thick clay soil
full of earthworms,

and it was April in the human heart.

Foresight

It was like a column of peas, rolling
down the long blade of a knife
toward your tongue. Like the long
blade slicing open a pea. Inside, the earth
to its core is full of spring; winter
will not stick. It was like hearing
the things beneath the ground you walk on,
a drumming deep in the ears,
as if from far in the earth. The empty
sky never sounded like this.

Yours are the ears of the earth
which never listens to heaven; it makes
a music of its own: percussion
beating a time that has nothing to do
with orbits, pole stars, clocks. Every
beat is spring pounding clear of winter.
Every beat is round, full of fruition. They roll
from sharp ridges into the hollows. Millions
of beats after millions of beats and the earth
is just as full as always, just as ripe.

Ascent

At least one world is contained
in the ruby flesh of today's garden tomato;

perhaps even a whole universe
lies beneath this smooth skin,

each yellow seed a planet, each drop of juice
a star, blazing red into the night of the knife.

This could be the first time you leave earth
without even an airtight suit to save you from the sky.

You could bite in, you could suckle
this small planet of flame

now orbiting your mouth.
You could cleave it with your teeth

taste it breaking into asteroids
each lick a meteor shower

sluicing behind the tongue
your lips and throat, portals to other worlds

your jaws, creator and destroyer
your mouth, full of moons.

Night

The gray-cheeked thrush, calling
from the farthest tree, a bright bell.

Later the wind waking you,
and thunder preparing and preparing.

The night sky,
once bright enough
to flood the world with stories,

has darkened in our insistent light.
What to make of these few dim stars?

Later the sun and the neolithic noise
of birds will obscure even those,

the only clarity the purple thistle
taking its place in the succession of flowers

Bamboo

The rain in the leaves sounds
like wind, and the night stirs
in its sleep, a small sound,
like crushed paper opening again,
each crease slowly unfolding.
That sound and the sound of rain
listen as something steals away.
Bamboo weaves its own dark,
bursts from the black earth:
eager for the air, it tangles up and up,
leaves clinging to one another
like spiders cling, learning their webs
from stem to stem, up through a sky
made thick with life.

Listen through the dark:
the different world being born.

Rain

The rain is still a noise to you, one noise
upon the roof, another in the trees.
It means what it will strike upon,
so upon a tree it speaks the name of a tree,
and so upon a roof, and on the ground,
and among the leaves on the ground.

You cannot help being envious of the trees.
Though they are cold, though they bend and break,
they are what they are. They move with the rain
upon them and with the rain they speak
with one voice.

What would the rain say of you,
you being largely deaf, if you would let it
tap into your hand?

Who will take you
by the hand, in anger at your unknowing,
and drum the world into you until you see,
until you hear it call your name?

Like This Sometimes

You feel like this sometimes,
the rain.
Not brave enough to drive straight down,
thinking you cut more
lastingly this way,
surprising.
You're pleased that looking up
they won't know, really,
where you came from.
Out of the blue, they'll shrug,
or gray.

Private, for all this fine spun
visibility, you'd silence talk of causes,
this low pressure front,
this high, how she looks at you
or doesn't, the glazed reply,
el nino, far away.
You prefer the now,
the jeweled transparency
of quickened time: this hour,
this eye-soaked day,
how many you have touched
in your descent, made shine,
and try, falling from a vacant sky,
not to think how quickly,
in a morning's warmth, they'll dry,
how routinely earth betrays you,
how much more beautiful the snow,
more lasting ice.

On Being X-rayed

Inside I am tangled,
And there is nothing unusual about that.

Folds and layers comprise me,
An accordion played soundlessly,

Muted by fluid, the heart-sounds implode
And the lungs wheeze like old machinery.

What malleable things we are, within,
Like clay or something softer, snow after a warm rain

And the feeling of being embedded there
Must be something like hearing rain beat on a roof,

Too loud to be just the wind,
Too quiet to be the damaging world.

Stubborn Dust

All is not lost, though sand marks our end.
The storms in an hour-glass form a mound
where we bury the spoils we cannot consume
and prepare our own places next to them.

We build on sand's moist shores, scoop it hollow
and leave it untouched while our backs are turned,
until our own skin has been sanded down
to its classic patterns, human, unharmed.

The palms of our hands become the terrain
they have tried to take hold of, dry, furrowed, finely
etched with the runes that the winds would leave,
did not these dunes themselves prove that we live.

L.A. Morning

Overmedicated with Vicodin, coffee and cigarettes,
watching a televangelist on cable TV,
I shall stumble no more through parking lots at dawn,
crawling under humming power lines,
dragging my legs like a broken animal
through grass wet with dew.
The radio towers have all been climbed
and I have bottomed out,
itching on the couch with a bowl of oatmeal,
a lighter, remote control, mute button engaged,
silence creeping from the mouths of the faithful
like fog, like white clouds
the morning after sampling the oldest drug in the world,
swearing again, for the last time, we are through.

Paradiso (California)

I have no brother,
But am no Cain, the guilt
Is too general, and the blood
Cries from this ground
And the neighbors' the same,
A lamentation heard only
As the hum of the world
Against the windows,
And my offering, here
Before my desk: only words,
For the animals and the sun
Have forsaken me both,
Neither bending to slaughter
Nor descending to nourish.

In the square-walled yard,
My daughters overturn stones
And last year's flower pots,
Searching for the sow bug
That curls in their tiny hands,
The sun breaks through low clouds
Just before it slips into the bay,
And I pretend it will suffice,
That standing in the pink light,
Together, will pay the dentist,
Will clothe their perfect bodies,
That I am no man's son, but father:
Dropping words from empty hands
Where the children gather to feed.

Annals of the Former World

They tore down the docks, the black wood
Pier-posts that staggered out to water,
Cleared the brush and leveled everything,
The abandoned fisheries, the pillars of rust.

The crabbers and the fishing boats still lie
Anchored in the bay, and men must work them
In the still dark of day, though from here
They are scenery: field of flagless masts and sky.

The boardwalk is new, concrete and soft-wood
That will not last the salt air, designed
In mock of those boats, fake rigging
And useless gear, all uplit by phosphor light.

But when the tide is out, the rocks
On the inland side of the walk raise up
Their filth and waste, kelp-strung and strangled:
The world that the sea wears on to ruin.

It's Coming Soon

The sign says "Coming Soon"
though I don't bother with the details.
It wants me to believe
there's nothing until the developers move in,
not old growth forest,
not New England bedrock,
not a squirrel, a raccoon, a possum,
not a choir of warblers,
and especially not the top-soil,
the layer of dirt that's bound
this world a billion years.

According to that assertive
chunk of cardboard
on its wooden stake,
not a grain, a leaf, a breath exists,
until man moves in
with his bulldozers.
There's no depth until a cellar's been dug,
no foundation, no shape,
until cement is poured,
walls nailed up, roof affixed,
people move in,
and someone begins to coax
the loam of centuries
into a temporary garden.

Canvassing the Inner Suburbs

Neighbourhoods.
Green leaved trees and chipmunks,
Bunnies at twilight and good old station wagons out front,
Beside the Beemers and eighties Porsches.
Barbeques at evening time on the back porch,

Ignoring the doorbell and those out there intruding
With their tired lines about the sky,
The unseen disorders that affect the afflicted
And are about to jump up and bite us on the arse.

I don't think so.
Not tonight.
I don't even want to contemplate it right now.
I've a steak on the grill
And two kids tearing shit out of either end of the cat.
Can't you see that you shouldn't be bothering me
With this stuff that doesn't bother me?

So Cheerio now,
Whatever cause you represent;
I resent the intrusion,
Yes, I do.
So you can step back off my porch,
Away from my door,
Off my lawn,

And I'll worry about that nuclear dawn
On my deathbed or when it's too late
To repair the damage;
I can barely manage my own affairs
And I'll have more to do still
If, as you suggest, my kids do fall ill.

From All That Haunts Us

I retreat, drawing close
the green walls of my world.
A chorus of birdsong mutes,

for these brief moments, the sirens of unholy wars.
At the top of the meadow, nestled
among the birdsfoot violets

and early grasses too short for cover,
a freckled newborn, legs neatly tucked,
pretends to be invisible.

Only the twitching of a moist nose
gives it away. I tiptoe on, unwilling
to contemplate its small, doomed life.

Isn't there a place where the deer can be safe?

says my grandson, crying,
when he learns about hunters. I turn
his question over as I turn the parchment skull

of the scavenged hawk,
puzzling for answers. Oh, let me slip
into my burrow, blind and dumb. Safe

is not a word that we can teach
to four year olds any more. Only
this moment, this sunshine, this fawn.

Contributor's Notes

Katherine Angus attended Brown University and now lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in various publications including CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY.

Jim Bill lives outside of Olympia, WA. His poems have appeared in PORTLAND REVIEW, FINE MADNESS, FOLIO, BORDERLANDS, and several other literary journals.

Teresa Breeden lives in the high desert of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Her poetry is forthcoming or published in AMHERST REVIEW, CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY, COLD MOUNTAIN REVIEW, and others.

Caleb Brooks is a New Englander who seems to find himself out of the trees a lot and in the desert. He is now living in Las Vegas exploring the Mojave and the Strip with equal enthusiasm.

Brad Buchanan lives in Sacramento, CA. Poems have appeared in over 60 American journals among them THE COMSTOCK REVIEW, CONNECTICUT POETRY REVIEW, and others.

Jack Cooper has written for television, film, and the stage. Poems have appeared in TUNDRA, CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY, POET LORE, THE EVANSVILLE REVIEW, and others.

Alice D'Alessio has published in numerous small journals including EARTH'S DAUGHTERS, POETRY HARBOR, and FOX CRY. Her work has won several statewide awards in Wisconsin.

Ed Davis works in the mental health field and lives in a small cabin (with battery powered lights, spring water, a wood stove, and propane powered hot water, oven and fridge) on Cove Mt. in Virginia.

Jeannine Dobbs has had poems appear in a number of journals, and a collection of her work was published by Alice James Books as one-third of THREE SOME POEMS (1979).

Bill Freedman teaches at the University of Haifa and at the Sakhnin College for Teacher Education in Israel, where he has lived since 1967. He has poems in APR, ANTIOCH REVIEW, THE IOWA REVIEW, THE NATION, and a book is forthcoming from Ginninderra Press titled BEING THEM ALL.

John Grey is an Australian-born poet, playwright, and musician. His latest book is WHAT ELSE IS THERE from Main Street Rag. He has recently published in BLUELINE, STUDIO ONE and JAMA.

Josh Hanson graduated from the U of Montana Writing Program. He edits the online journal EUCALYPTUS: A JOURNAL OF THE BROKEN NARRATIVE. His work appears in DIAGRAM, PEGASUS, ROCK SALT PLUM, and others.

Monty Jones lives in Austin, TX. His poems have appeared in NEW MEXICO HUMANITIES REVIEW, CUMBERLAND REVIEW, CONCHO RIVER REVIEW, DESCANT, and others.

Adrie Lester has had poems in PEREGRINE and THE COMSTOCK REVIEW and is upcoming in IBBETSON ST. PRESS. She was one of four poets featured in an “Evening of Regional Poets” at Inkberry in North Adams, MA, last winter.

Sara Moore lives in Dublin, OH, and recently graduated with a BA in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State Univ. Aside from her undergraduate literary magazine, this is her first publication.

Carol Motsinger is an undergrad art history and journalism major at the U of Maryland, College Park, and has just finished a two-year creative writing program at the Jimenez-Porter’s Writer’s House.

Phong Nguyen is the editor of CREAM CITY REVIEW. He has won a number of awards recently, among them an Academy of American Poets Award and the William Harrold Memorial Poetry Award.

Kate Nuernberger has published work in numerous journals including THE MISSOURI REVIEW, THE CIMARRON REVIEW, and SOUTHERN INDIANA REVIEW. She is a grad student in creative writing at Eastern Washington University.

David O’Brien was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland and studied environmental biology and zoology at UCD. His poems are in various anthologies in Britain as well as the Irish journal CADENZA.

Andy Roberts makes a living as a wastewater treatment plant operator for the city of Columbus, OH, and has had poems and stories published in NATIONAL FORUM and SAN JOSE STUDIES.

C.C. Russell has had poems in NEW YORK QUARTERLY, CIMARRON REVIEW, HAZMAT REVIEW and others. His fiction has appeared in OYSTER BOY REVIEW, GRASSLIMB and others. He holds a BA in English from the University of Wyoming.

Becky Dennison Sakellariou was born and raised in New England but has lived all her adult life in Greece. She has published poems in a number of journals in both Greece and U.S., among them BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL and BELLINGHAM REVIEW.

Dana Thu now lives in Indio, CA. He has appeared in AVOCET and in POETALK and has previously published in ALBATROSS.

Nadine York lives in Idaho. Her poems have been published in CABIN FEVER, STANDING: POETRY BY IDAHO WOMEN, and THE BOISE VISUAL ART CHRONICLE.

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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