

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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God hath chosen the weak things of the world

Here are the botched scrub brush
and miscellaneous junk flora

God decided not to use after all,
bad ideas scratched out of His notebooks.

At least I think so driving through—
until I see how evening light

makes everything invaluable:
seepweed, saltbrush, mule's fat,

even the distant bare hills
where nothing ever takes root.

Temple Cone

The World Before Adam Named It

Adam named the animals. It fell to Noah to remember
Those names after God drowned the world for its errancy.
The waters are rising again; it's time to consult the field guides.

Noah didn't gather sea beasts, but what of the albatross
That crosses barren waters for weeks on end?
Could one wander without ever learning of that fatal flood?

How long would it recall the lost world when it returned?
Coleridge loved the ungainly bird. Clumsy himself,
He swept over oceanic distances with epiphanic grace,

Starshine striking him with the force of a crossbow bolt.
Once, I stood in a hayfield under the Milky Way, spiraling
Like the stars until I forgot what it meant to be named.

Newborn foals will answer to any name you call them.
There are gods on Greek amphorae we still haven't identified.
The shade of scrub piñons can't outlast the shade of bare rock.

Temple, we've come to your favorite stanza, the signature,
Where your name becomes a harp the soft winds play over,
Untethered sounds drifting back to the world before Adam named it.

The Gospel Beasts

When illuminating the Bible, scribes assigned beasts
To each gospel: Matthew, the lion; Mark, the eagle; Luke, the ox;
John, who spoke of hell, a man, though sometimes a rainbow.

Crossing back over their migratory routes each spring,
Geese honk glad tidings to tracks they made last autumn,
Bugle *bon voyage* to their goose selves the autumn next.

The wild pony's shyness was like a wild pony itself.
She cantered about the pasture, drawing near, then retreating.
Later, fireflies carried their flickering lamps into the trees.

The peregrine is a swift machine, terrifying as Rilke's angels.
We revel in its beauty, but never imagine ourselves
The rabbit pinned in the field, talons raking out our hearts.

The fox awaits the bear's sleep to come alive. Winters,
He's the ember that eternal whiteness cannot snuff out.
Digging after voles, he opens tunnels for spring wildflowers.

And what if salvation hangs on the waves off Point Sur
As much as on an old man's lips? We might ask the seals.
Look how they cavort amid the cold, rushing waters.

Rembrandt's Lion

Rembrandt's drawing of a sleeping lion astounds us.
The claws flex gently. Ribs shift under a thick, loose pelt.
When we catch its eyes watching us, we feel our own heartbeat.

A shark rolls its eyes back in eclipse when mauling prey.
A survival reflex, for though the tang of blood beckons,
Only the ocean's endless, empty blue keeps it roving.

Many who've lived have never killed fish, flesh, or fowl,
So have never owned the death they put in their mouths,
Have never breathed the smoke, never tasted the wine.

At the edge of a thousand woods, shadows streak and hover,
Electrons in a cloud waiting for perception to fix their shapes.
When they emerge, they are the deer they were meant to be.

The ancients knew that blindness clarified vision,
Awakening chthonic senses. They envisioned blindness
As the path to finding the purity that sleeps within.

I am the thief who would knife open sacks of jewels
Without splitting one seam. These poems are the vision
Of the eyes I had before I was born, bleary with wombglight.

Before the Age of Reason

Speaking to animals
The fenced in Collie, chain-linked threat
Of Shepherds, the bourgeois Scotties.
I visit them keeping to my side of boundaries.

Certain trees, bushes, flowerbeds.
Lombardy poplar out of a sketch book,
Chinese elm, extravagant Eucalyptus. Bridal wreath,
Greensick Snowball, excited tongues of Forsythia,
Persian lilacs wafting through porch windows.

I suck nectar from phlox
Shudder with the fragrance of peonies,
Hold flat-faced velvet pansies in my palm
Strangle the disagreeable Marigolds,
The perilous bells of lily-of-the-valley
Ring a dark gangway.

First memory: dismembering a dandelion
While older children chant. Blue tunnel of air,
World hemmed with roofs. I am the goddess of anthills,
Inspector of hauled beetles, slave-driven workers laboring
Through sand to the living tomb. Milking of aphids,
All domestic routines.

I squat in noon sun
Square on my shadow. Arbiter.
The one voice
among dumb things.

My Mother the Cook

If we were lucky fried roe and fish cakes for breakfast.
My mother skinned and breaded the blowfish and
Cooked them to a nut-colored crisp.

After lunch and cocktails that turned her tipsy and
My father lost his temper and rattled the chairs and table,
She would bake the striped bass or blue fish
With the head and tail left on
Then suck every last bone.

Sometimes it was blue crab caught in a cage
With the enticement of fish-heads,
Or it was mushrooms harvested over a sand dune
On the way to the Sunken Forest.
My father the city boy was convinced they would kill us.
He turned pale and sweaty as we sautéed them in butter.
My mother the country girl swore they were edible.
I was hungry. Terrified. I raised my fork.

No Story Here

I wasn't the one on the farm. I had these jobs, bring in a little cash, even without the kids asking for this and that, there was always a note to pay. I was a clerk or cleaned at the school. I only did the over-and-overs: cook, clean, dishes, laundry, mend, garden, can. Hold this while someone fixes it, drive the Deere so they can load hay, or go along to open and close the gates. It wasn't farming, only what people do.

Valley Farm

That shadow didn't clear till middle of the morning, and by middle of the afternoon it was back. That's how deep, how steep the sides of the valley. With the river coming up springtimes and snow piling the road to town in winter, that didn't leave many hours. We lived next to the widow with six kids, and her man who couldn't speak plain. He went with Dad to the fair, chipped in on the peeler that dizzied an apple right out of its sweet red skin. That was a day like a party! But mostly: was there enough salt pork for a week? Would the river rise to the henhouse or not? Ma wouldn't let us bring books home in case something happened, who'd pay? But Dad said where's the harm in reading? He shouldn't have been surprised we learned about other places, that we each figured out how to get away.

Girl

Holding the spigot steady, that was me,
or if they needed the bag of feed, I'd marked
where so I could go. The boys on the hill
took me along, no trouble, and good fishing.

I wasn't like my sister. My mother let me go.
Washing the dirty eggs was close as I came
to housework. I held the bucket for the calf,
rode in Dad's wagon with the milk cans

to the creamery in Eagle Bridge. When he
killed a cow and hung it in the shed, I sharpened
knives and bled it out while he dressed it. Dad
drove me to the big school, nine rooms

instead of one, and the art teacher. When she said
college, he gave me his satchel, he took me
to the train. I used to be my father's
boy. I used to be the one.

Bottle Vase

You can live your life in fear
of the terrible thing happening

or you can stand on the table
and hold the pink rose.

A woman will come to replenish
the water, the rose will die,

you will be put away for a time
until you are needed again.

The dust can always be rinsed away.

Someone will love the rose more than you.
Someone will run hands up & down your form.
Someone will admire your smooth translucence.
Somehow everyone will know of your former life,
the fullness of the wine.

None of this matters
and you did not shape the molecules
of molten glass.

Even when it happens
(the shattering)

there will be another life
with you or without you

whether you exist in shards, as sand,
or melt again into a new shape.

You are already emptied.

In the Garden

The forecast is for killing frost,
but the old sheets and bedspreads lie
in the green file cabinet for
I have given up gardening. Now

in late autumn it seems
I have given up more than I knew.
That push and urge and busyness,
but more than that.

The tomato, the string bean
planted in early spring
protected from late frost,
tended, hoed, mulched,

watered in the drought of high summer.
Harvesting, urged on by relentless swiss chard
and every picked bean to be processed
or it will lie moldering in the refrigerator,

soon no better than the ones in the supermarket,
like winter tomatoes, good only when the taste of the real thing
is forgotten. I thought I resented all that time on my knees,
or bent over rows, back aching,

brain protesting, wanting only to quit, wanting not to be grateful
for this bounty. Forgetting how it would be, one day, a day
like any other, I could be on my knees weeding,
or standing with a tomato in my hand,

birds in the trees, a distant car on the highway
in the garden this stillness.

The Green Eyed Lunatic

Funny how things change.

This poem was supposed to be about a green eyed lunatic
lurking in the dark, scaring as many children as possible.

But for some reason my mind switched gears,

and I began to listen to the rain fall outside my window,

really listen, deeply and honestly to the symphony,

the tears of gods, the rise of empires.

The Dark Stains of Yellow Veins

Tu Fu, you're talking to me—
telling me to pay attention, like a good teacher—
to listen to the shunk
 of a knife cutting through potatoes,
or the sound of a metal blade being pulled across grains of wood.
You're telling me to feel the dusty spray of gravel
as I lay a piece of stone,
to note how raw the thin separation
we call skin becomes.

Orange persimmon leaves
 are casting morning shadows on themselves.
The dark stains
of yellow veins are speaking.
Tu Fu, your words are telling me,
across long years your dead roots are showing me,
saying— just watch—
for a moment— a bird
kicking around in a pile of leaves.

Fall Chores

Then there was no wind, no sound
but a rake through the leaves. I lay
down close to them. I lay down
to listen and mark how

my ears were made to think,
to make me think, this sound is like
the sound surf makes,
coming in and in, and drawing out again. It is

the sound of fire, the crackling of sticks
and the pop good wood makes,
when it heats and expands. It is the wind's
hand, brushing these leaves. Not mine. This bag,

I am this bag, black, glistening, making
its own sound. The lip
grows slack, purses, frowns.
The leaves spill out or fill

the fold. I am what needs filling.
I am a mouth opening to be filled,
or cinching at the throat. I am a friend
to trees. I hold what they have lost.

Flurry, Early December

The snow is falling. It
is fine. A fine snow,
like a girl's hair, a small
thing sleeping in her mother's arms.

The snow is falling, and
I want to walk out
in it. I want to be a part
of snow, and I want

to hold it in my open hands.
I say to the snow: You
are my child. You
the meaning of my life.

Tomorrow, there will be
nothing of you left.
A person lighting a fire
will think: how cold and dry

the wood, the air,
the atmosphere, and he
will praise God, the one
who rises to praise and says:

What is this? What is
this wonderful thing
falling around my ears
and touching my warm skin?

Peterson Butte Fossil Beds

Our Saturday field trip, just outside of town
where the fields become audacious, curvy —
the twiggy apple orchards, filbert groves give way
to plump hills with the allure of the ancient barrows
they resemble — marine sarcophagi
Oligocenic tombs.

A half-scraped hillside, rippled, canted
ancient ocean bottom
follows the road into brambles
a thick layer, swirled
calligraphy of black peat with pale dots
umlauts of clams.
Around the bend a small mine
scoops the mound like a cup overturned.

Talus slope littered
piggybacked, mud clams
wedged like tourists in sand.
Aloof in shoals, razorclams
and snails congregate thinly.
The kids scramble for easy pickings;
experts search out the best, the prize.

Crawling over the slope like bugs,
chipping with screwdrivers, we are
bewildered at this freshness —
“thirty million years. . .”
doesn’t fit this handful of dense mud
or the scatterings of clam. Our only clue:
shells crumble as easy as sand.
We carry our precious handfuls to the truck
skidding down ancient strata
to the road; its billion year gravel
a gray, anonymous
miracle.

Montrose Basin Sea Eagle

Barely a rumour
probably nothing more than a buzzard
talked-up by a tourist for the local paper
but just the thought of those vast earth-brown wings
circling this borderland of mud, marsh and tide
is enough to make you lean closer to the window
of the Glasgow train, yearning for a glimpse.
But the Montrose skies show no eagle
and so the eye makes do with a cormorant
swooping south across the lagoon —
if the raw beautiful shock of seeing
something so shimmeringly black and quick
and downright miraculous as a cormorant
glide through the waning coastal light
can be described as *making do*.

Wheels Up, Westbound Out of O'Hare

It was only this morning
and warm where you walked away.
The sun was shining in your hair
and there was a light, spicy wind
left over from last night
blowing through the palms
and a commotion of leaves
and blossoms I had no names for.

A dove that could have hatched
in your own backyard
last spring, or in mine, flew
down, spreading grey tail feathers
tipped with white.
Tiny lizards
with names like the leaves
scattered on the sidewalk
out of your way.

Here, nothing scatters.
The sun is hammered out
to a narrow band of fire.
Black rolls back from gold
in a solid wave
from Brainerd to Bull Shoals.

Below, bare limbs of maple, oak, shag
bark hickory, cottonwood, tangled
canes of wild rose, raspberry, ruffles
on the Wapsipinicon, Neosho, Nishnabotna.

All these I know
by heart, by touch, by scent

by the sweet flavor
of their syllables
rolling over my tongue

by the way their breath
quickens in unison with mine

*

by the words they whisper
to the stones and the stones pass on
as prayers of repentance, gratitude

celebration, melodious
warnings of fast water, cold
water, promises
of deep, deep water.

The Great Soft Mountains

The great soft mountains are slipping
into the California sea. The rain
linked with an underground river
and now houses and pools nosedive
and plummet like lemmings running
wildly to catch the ocean's waves.

The earth is constantly reclaiming
her own. The history of this planet
is written in fire and water, in cities
that mummify and turn to dust, whole
civilizations that drop like stones
into the salty stew of the seas.

There are mountains waiting to be born
in the cornfields, canyons eager
to spread their jaws where plains
roll their green lawns to the foothills.
Even the hills know they must someday
prepare to burrow into valleys below.

One thing becomes another. Molecules
and atoms find new ways to dance.
In their wake continents emerge,
the riddle of the species puts on new skins
and learn to name new ways of singing.
The oneness of things wraps around time

until time folds in on itself and becomes
stuff without beginning or end, essence
that requires neither matter nor space,
light that dismisses shadow, shadow
that watches as the great soft mountains
slip solemnly into the California sea.

South Rim

The drumbeat comes
from cheap speakers, a tape
they must have made themselves
back home.

The feathers, fringed sticks,
they've dragged from the dusty blue
Buick they parked behind
the gift shop.

It's hot August,
and embarrassed for him, for us,
I watch from a shaded spot
along the curb.

His mild mother,
the microphoned solemnity
of his beaded father naming the dance
the eagle dance of old: so sad.

But oh winged son —
blood's force, mystery fleshed new,
song I'd sing forever true:
the saddest

pretty moment of my tourist's
afternoon, blue canyon at my back
as big, as old and empty
as the sky.

Curves and Lines

Walls do much more damage
Than simply withholding or
Hiding sights: even outside,
They stymie with straight lines
The chaos we instinctively
and unconsciously crave—

The crookedness of tree limbs,
The rugged cut of rocks and
Rumpled surface of leaves—

So encased in such square shapes
We cling to whatever curves
We see.

Tales Four Times Told

tales four times told by the ragged log's ghost
the bright name of the lion sun descending from arctic clouds
folding the rustling earth-blanket between hands of stone
(the grindstone hollows swallow gravity easily as water)
a hummingbird wordlessly speaking fire
into the bark-gray tresses of winter's ever morning

the oaks imagine a thousand worlds celebrating the returning light
the mountain wind carries spears of snow beneath bee-stung arms
the lichens grow into dreaming moons in anticipation of the approaching
 evening
honey body ant whose footsteps whisper: bones past bones emerging
 laughing
 from the graveless earth
(sorrow follows man, the reason the hills bleed, crying a skull's tears
 into the descending afternoon)

hawk's head, plaited with grass, calling out from the
newborn shadows of clover
your nectar storms hold these todays like manzanita rain between their
 slow fingers
i'd search the crimson mud for your tracks departing
 but i know that you are present
i'd shout a rooster into the hillside half-light
 but i know that you are awakening
i'd leave behind my bone marrow to make you a body
 but i know the whole world flows into you
i'd blow grief's smoky horn for your imminent demise
 but i know that you are forever

Breakup on the Guadalupe

The future is always a lover's back
whether we chance goodbye or not.

Bones shift in the ground like teacups
thrown to this river. Our minds hold the dead

as our hands hold the current. Rilke warns
Be ahead of all parting

as if we could displace grief and mourn the living.
The dead do not want us dead.

Save your black bolts of cloth for dinner with friends.
The river, too, will one day run dry.

At that cracked bend you will find sediment
and water lines, but you will not see the river.

And should you find the teacup's rim
prising through clay as bones bloom in sand,

it remains only a china cup, not the afternoon
picnic from which it was flung.

Elegies and Requiems

Our bodies fade like the slow exhale
of evening. How exotic the sky looks as it swells,
as we slide through twilight. The violent cities

within us—clusters of black flesh—crumble
under the night air. We move the stars
to pity with that last gasp,

the slow sigh, the release.
They will never know such a flash—
to burn and then burn out, to cry

against the night, to let the darkness in.
And how strange the last breath, how shallow,
as the body slips into its weight, the instant

it sinks. But only in this decline
do we consider how awkward and unplanned
each breath, each step, each beat. At night,

we forget the morning we stole rhythm
from our mother's blood, when one measure
of flesh echoed another into being. How bright

the rising note, the widening lung.
When the sky first listened,
when the body began to speak.

Stephen Berry lives in Vallejo, CA, where he runs a business designing and installing gardens. He has put out three chapbooks of his work: *Composting Language*, *To*, and *Simple Talk*. He was recently pub'd in *Kadar Koli*, *Blind Pen* and the upcoming *Ship of Fools*.

Joan Colby has published seven books including *The Lonely Hearts Killers* and *The Atrocity Book*. She has over 850 poems in publications including *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, and others as well as publishing previously in *Albatross*.

Temple Cone is the author of *The Loneliness*, winner of the 2009 FutureCycle Poetry Book Prize, and of five chapbooks. His poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and others. He is an associate professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Ruth Webber Evans lives on a lake in Maine where she watches loons in summer and ice fishermen in winter. Her poems are pub'd in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *The Aureorean*, and others.

Ronnie Hess is a journalist whose work has appeared in national and regional newspapers and magazines. Her poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *Alimentum*, *Arbor Vitae*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Wisconsin People and Ideas*. She is also the author of a chapbook, *Whole Cloth* (Little Eagle Press, 2009).

Sam Jensen lives in Davis, CA, and teaches high school. His work has appeared in *The Rattlesnake Review* and *Luna's Anthology*. His hobbies include long walks in the woods and old book stores.

Kathleen Kirk publishes regularly in print and online literary journals and is the author of three chapbooks: *Selected Roles* (Moon Journal Press, 2006), *Broken Sonnets* (Finishing Line Press, 2009), and *Living on the Earth* (Finishing Line, New Women's Voices Series #74). She has previously published in *Albatross*.

Drew Lankford is from Tennessee and currently teaches 7th grade Reading and Language Arts in Nashville.

Catherine McGuire has more than a hundred poems published—recent ones in *The Lyric*, *New Verse News*, and *Main Street Rag*. She has a chapbook titled *Joy into Stillness: Seasons of Lake Quinault* and is currently assistant director at CALYX Press.

David O'Brien was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland and moved to Boston in 2004 after spending four years in Spain. A zoologist and environmental biologist, he teaches biology at the high school and college levels. Apart from poetry, he writes short stories and novels, for children and adults, and is currently working on his first play. He has previously published in *Albatross*.

Adam Penna lives in East Moriches, NY. He teaches at Suffolk County Community College and holds an MFA from Southampton College, LIU. His poems have appeared in *Abbey*, *Bellowing Ark* and *Cimarron Review*. He is the author of *The Love of a Sleeper* (Finishing Line Press, 2008) and *Little Songs & Lyrics to Genji* (S4N Books, 2010), and he edited *Best Poem*, an online journal.

Chris Powici lives, writes, and teaches in Perthshire, Scotland. His poetry and occasional very short fiction has appeared in all manner of magazines, journals, and anthologies from *BBC Wildlife* to *Flashquake*. He has been the grateful recipient of a writing bursary from the Scottish Arts Council.

Don Russ is the author of *Dream Diving* (Kennesaw State University Press, 2007) and the chapbook *Adam's Nap* (Billy Goat Press, 2005). He has new poems in *Avocet*, *Chiron Review*, *Poem*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. He has previously published in *Albatross*.

Rob Talbert has work accepted by *American Poetry Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Portland Review*, *The Sow's Ear* and others. He is from San Antonio, TX.

Don Thompson has been publishing for over forty years. Recent chapbooks are *Turning Sixty* from March Street Press (which published *Been There, Done That* a few years ago), and *Sittin' on Grace Slick's Stoop* from Pudding House. *Where We Live* was released in July 2009 from Parallel Press (University of Wisconsin). *Back Roads*, winner of the Sunken Garden Poetry Chapbook Contest, was published in 2009. He has also previously published in *Albatross*.

Robert Tremmel teaches at Iowa State, coordinating the teacher ed program in the English Dept. He has work pub'd or forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Roanoke Review*, *The Southern Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and others. His latest collection is *Crossing Crocker Township*, from Timberline Press.

Will Tyler lives in Jackson, TN, with his wife and son. He works from home as a freelance editor but spends most of his day chasing his energetic two-year old. His poetry is forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*.

Nancy White has her second book, *Detour*, soon to be published by Tamarack Editions. Her first book, *Sun, Moon, Salt*, won the Washington Prize for poetry.

Fredrick Zydek has previously appeared in *Albatross* and has also published poems in *The Antioch Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry* and others. *Hooked on Fish* was published by the Holmes House Chapbook Series in 2009. He lives in Omaha, Nebraska.

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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