

ALBATROSS



#23

“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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23

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Homage to the Smokies

Start with the bees.
Pray for them,
for their brizz and bumbling
into the honeyed cores of flowers —

showy orchis, cutleaf toothwart,
phlox and painted trillium,
fire-pinks and bluets,
gay wings, wild geranium, rue.

Pray for the mottled trunks of trees,
straight-shot or hobbled,
for their clambering roots
and the rocks they grasp,

holding their own in the river's crush.
Pray for the river.
Pray for the heedless gush
of the torrent

and the silent pools
where the clouds and all the leaves
are doubled, the new fish darting
among them, swifter than birds.

Pray for the birds, their eachness,
the startling flush of their flight,
their song, their patient nests.

Ask that the wren and the warbler,
tufted titmouse, sweet phoebe,
and the flicker all endure.

Pray for the Great Horned Owl.
Speak their names into the breaking day.

Alchemy

Wake up, world.
Wake up, beautiful cities, your minarets,
your towers, your secret tunnels.

Let's all rise up out of water, out of flame,
out of whatever element has chosen us.
Let's be breathless in our new bodies.

How we'll gleam after that ruthless scouring —
maybe a pelting acid rain, everything
corroding down to bone-shine.

I myself would throw my arms toward
that fierce electric sky and gladly
sing my fingers on such glory, wouldn't you?

I'd even open my mouth to the sudden
frost that follows and receive the cold
dark ash that tumbles flake after flake,
gathering the bounty inside me, feeling
blessed, knowing we have come to this,

saying the words out loud,
saying ash,
saying sin, saying

Blessed be the old furrowed ground,
plowed and broken.
Blessed be this new blanket of silt.
Blessed be our panting hearts

with their crooked ways, our lopsided hope
holding us here, straddling night and day,
awkward in this dusk, but beautiful.

Still Point

Place at once instinctive: dappled trees,
fringes of light, dew not a drink offered

but so sieved in the sun — here, each diamond
aches — the botched, the disparate

buckle of cloud into cavity that admits
little room for accident, claims *thrill*,

claims *never the frangible world will await*
your particular song what the body can

and cannot impart, hapless, beyond battlement
as it always is. The wind swift-footed spurs

dry grass like zithers like so many chimes —
or pages turned? — or these our limbs

that hound the river's breath, the mere
gauze of twilight disarming ligaments loose,

knuckles disband as bones, hysteric, clamor
toward the pandemic moon. Is the wild wreckage

envying in question *tell me of this singular*
urgency against time as fists of purple thistles,

scarcely-limbed, cower in prayer, strangle
the footpath we might know

into safety, into voice emergent, lone warrior
against all that comes for us here

while the river, scalloped, in spite of
let loose the haunted pretense distends, dissection

draws near, beckons and too unscheduled
to rage, too conquered the body *weighted*

indelicacy blooms doxian, chrysalis splintered
into olivine and smoke, what now we must

seal each fracture with, inconsolable
as we are, be it litanies tongued fierce,

amorphous, or this flesh upon flesh, or this air
gravity still bears against us.

The Gift

...contains hundreds, and possibly more than 1,000, [Lepidoptera] species new to science.

— Florida Museum of Natural History

Creation, word-work
in this still unfinished world, naming-song
in these gardens of our wingless dream:
is it not a bliss assigned us?

We are keepers of the treasure-house
of snow and the book of stars — late mappers
of a restless oneness in the deep, a chaos
waiting for us to speak.

Glass-topped scraps of angel-flight,
some colored-glass annunciations shadowed
on a temple floor: above, behind it all,
all light unfolded long ago.

Anthem in Eden

It is not without reason the sky opens
to us as we open to it. We have passed
through so many nights of disbelieving,
it hardly seems plausible to start over.

Where will it take us? No one knows.
But when the stars draw closer
in their millions to greet the living
eye, anything becomes possible.

When the doubts of centuries burden
us with their prayers we will assume
for a day the knowledge all creation knows —
what has a beginning must also end.

But when I watch you cross the room,
the smallest gestures of your hips
command all of my attention, as though
to say, forget what we cannot know

what we cannot change, love is upon us.

How Close We Come to Love

If I say, *God grant me*,
the strength will come
and joy will follow.
It isn't what I thought.
No running or jumping on the lawn
or from the roof,
where as a boy I charted, point
by point, the universe.
It is something else. It is small.
A rabbit comes to mind,
munching delicious grass.
And the fast cars passing unaware
how close they come to love,
what they could have
if they slowed down,
if they could see the field beyond,
where every morning
new life wakes.
And where a god still walks
and talks all night
to anyone with ears.

Groundhog Day

Because underneath all this absence
there lies a beating heart, though it is faint,
so faint because if you dig it up and hold
it in your hands, between your palms,
you might not hear it or detect the pulse,
but it is there, and so is the sunshine. Look,
already the days are lengthening.
And soon the long shadows withdraw.
I have been waiting all year for this.
Call it magic. Call it whatever you want,
and let words like *forecast*, *weather*, *storm* and *snow*
prepare another hemisphere for tragedy,
but it will be here, leaning in the doorway,
father-like, and full of so much love,
and if it isn't, let the absence be, this time,
a placeholder, something that means: *I will return*.

Mountain Voices

What could we say
we who wanted so much,
all the answers
there in the high ridges
the narrow trails leading up.

And at night we tasted the dark
for the first time.
We died and became the other,
our voices still as the stones
that know more than we
and always would.

The eons, the heavings and
foldings through the near
infinity of earth's
long story.

We made our fires in the
deep shade of afternoon.
We watched them die
in the black cold
of night.

What did we find there.
What did we know.

We the lovers wanting grasp
of some vastness always
beyond.

We who held one another
through the long nights
believing the voices of the
ancient dead,
hiding our own as in
a shroud,

*

our brief moments of flesh
and blood already shrinking
into a past that would
swallow us,
eat us whole.

Drifting

things I have and
don't have
come from this
moving between
people like
smoke. I've been
waiting the way
milkweed I
brought inside two
years ago stays
suspended, hair in the
wind it seems to
float, even its
black seeds don't
pull it down
tho you don't under
stand how any
thing could stay
that way
so long

All Afternoon We

read Lorca
by five snow
blurred the
glass. February. I
leaned against
those chill panes.
Gypsies
burned through the
snow with apples
You in the
other room
I was thinking
don't let
this be some
warmth I can
move near
and never know

Ruminants

The grace of water vapor;
its choreography of light;
occasionally a charred tree:
This is sky's gift to Earth. We,
we hide in caves, tremble among the bones
of our meal. How clean

the sky, which never eats; how
shorn of stars by its clouds.

We, we bury loved ones in mud, track across
continents, leave fossils, flints, evidence.

Moon ebbs, waxes
without hope, without envy. We tell
its story:

Someone (up there)
cares (is looking out) for us
(even at night).

In some sense, we're right:
our children watch our remains
through glass — point at our depictions,
welcome us into their picture books.

This, in its way, is love.

The Story of Death

Imagine how (after millions of years)
the heavier energy of the sun
bursts free. Such things travel in spheres:
they communicate globally.

I'm telling you the story of light
and darkness. (Any description has
both, and only both.) Here is

the other half:
The hope of darkness in the hint of shade
(there is still life in the back of the closet).
The small child
trapped in the dark of dreams
— this is no metaphor —
screams her way into light.
Her parents bring peace with a switch
on the wall.

Over and over again
there is this contrast,
staccato like texture.
We lose sight of it
in the galaxy of color (the
rampaging rainbow, with its promise
of organization).

Shape is deep,
when it reflects itself in color.
The fragment of sculpture: it
aspires to motion by decay.
Here too (all so sadly) there is the lesson.

You know how the story ends:
the twilight that brings.

Louisa May, Writing to Henry from Rome

The Tiber is flooding, as spring works on the snow
upstream. An old woman, drenched, shivering,
reluctantly rescued, calls for some snuff. It's the rivers
that bind us, Henry, human being to human being,
Concord to Rome. I think of you almost every day.
I quickly tire of ancient ruins, marble, gods, gods, gods.
I hear your voice asking, *What do I need this moment?*
A little snuff, a dry shawl. A quiet room, the sound
of May's pencil as she sketches the view from our hotel.
To have you back with us, among the living, telling us
what you need. *A little boat, you'd say, and my brother,
and an afternoon to ride these waters to the sea.*

In Memory

In memory of Rachel Blank daughter of James and Matilda Blank who departed this
Life August 25th 1803 aged 5 years and 19 days

— gravestone at Trinity Church, New York City

When you arrived at the path through the meadow
but could not go three steps in, the way blocked
by web after web, glimmering in the morning sun,

a fat spider in the center of each, what did the old woman —
herself a child come over from England, and never
letting go of the terror of that crossing, the vast nothing

called sea, the voice of death in the creak of every timber —
what did she say, something about *an omen, she'll go
not much further through life*, saying this just as you

looked back and saw your mother's face go white,
saw her move as if to slap the hag, catch herself,
took, instead, your little hand, a bit too tightly,

and held it like that all the way home, saying only,
when you asked, "What is an *omen*, Mamma?"
Hush, child, do not take up what lost souls let drop.

The Vocabulary of Loss

Gulls come back with rain.
You'd think storms would be enough
to keep them out
of the Bandon, where they bob
among breaking white caps.
At times like this, from far enough off,

they can be mistaken for the swells
of water. Local lore has it
the dead come back,
as gulls, to harangue a lover,
unfaithful, or watch over
a child. Crying over the water,

its ruthless voice almost human,
the vocabulary of loss
is a gull's *raison d'être*.
The dead, it turns out,
have nothing to say
we'd ever want to hear.

*

It's not a beautiful storm
—it needs more time, centuries
perhaps as sea birds

wingtip to wingtip the way water
backs up in the streets
half rain, half from memory

and everyone who died today
holding your hand
and not moving

—there's no more room
though the mourners
lash down the dead

who still give up their lips
trying to remember
safe in the grave

why each kiss now
has no bottom, nothing left
only the gentle breeze to come.

Vanishing Point

Here Sam Ferguson shot and killed
the last known bull bison.

—Roadside Marker
Kansas Highway 27 South

Gray-hooded clouds
pulled over
fallow prairie hills,
ragged bluestem and sage.
A red-tailed hawk,
suspended,
on the verge of flight,
no flutter of windmills.
A line of cedar posts
strung with barbed wire
runs parallel
to a resurfaced highway,
a yellow center line,
disappearing
into looming
winter
snow.

September Rain

The first weak leaves fall,
though this night
seems summer: humid and
hot, lightning still lighting
the sky after rain. On the
wet black road, patches of yellow leaves
lie limp under trees even as fog
gathers in hollows diffusing the light
from the car. One moment a straight stretch of road
could be July — no trees hanging over, the
black unbroken, thick air teasing
the eyes — the next: October —
where a tree leans, a curve in the road
leaf-covered, slick as if ice.

A Sign of Rain

It was a sign of rain.
The clouds grew darker,
the wind rose,
and the small birds hunched in the bushes.
Out on the beach a man walked
unmindful of the signs,
the sound of the waves,
his thoughts overwhelming his senses
so even the sad gulls' cries
were not heard.

*Box Turtle on the Highway Near Jim Thorpe's Home
in Yale, Oklahoma*

Following an ancient path most humans have forgotten,
she's clawed her way up from the safe swirl of cane
to the middle of this hot, night-black ribbon
where hard metal winds roar past,
louder than the rumble of summer thunder.

Although she remembers
without need of thought,
the way to that place where each generation
before has gone to lay their eggs,
there is no room in her memory's depth
for crushing wheels or intolerant steel.

But I stop when I see her.
The old pact between us,
held in our stories,
tells how she and her kin
support Earth on their backs.

I pick her up, feel the scratch of her claws
and the nudge of her head against my palms.
I take it as a sort of blessing
before I place her deep in the grass
where red sand awaits her clutch of eggs.

My heart feels lighter as I go on my way
knowing I have touched a stubborn circle
that may continue to hold all of us,
despite this century's weight.

Observations of My Arm

Hair grows from my arm two or three
strands to a pore.
It shines like filaments of gold in the lamplight.

I am reminded that we have the same
number of hairs as a chimpanzee,
our cousin who never learned to stand,

never got that muscle memory deep into her thighs and followed it.
Pigment dark as earth floats to the surface of my skin
like a lily pad extending to the sun.

I am all mammals beneath their fur — pale, white, sunless.
These freckles remind me that I was there long ago,
that every memory within me has its place.

Drought

The wells went dry, then the rivers
Lessened to a trickle and disappeared
Leaving only indentations studded with pebbles
And the occasional boulder.

We sent the cattle to slaughter rather than watch them die of thirst.
Chickens scratched a pointless calligraphy in bare earth and ants
Caravanned through clapboards, not for sugar
But for the most elemental element.

Now the water witch dances with his willow rod
Comes up with nothing, his arms numb with loss.
Levels of everything diminish, even tears
Clog in our ducts leaving us red eyed and sorry.

Our pockets once jingling with hope
Are full of sand. Scorpions
Crawl where the wisteria used to flower
Over the old pergola. Every afternoon
Clouds float over, empty as pillowcases.

Chac, god of rain, frowned on the Mayan virgins
Threw his sacks of water over his shoulder and stomped off.
Their bones in the empty wells meant nothing.
Meant less than nothing.

The dust storms drive everyone to the sea
Where the pickings are slim, the water
Murderous. On the weather maps
A fiery splotch promises more of the same.

What can we give each other
Besides the names of every kind of water
Into which we ever dipped our hands
The Great Lakes, the springs, the creeks, the rivers
And always the blessing of the rain.

Pay attention now. Look for one
Green thing to remember.

Mowing

I've cut down the twin thin and scraggly hazelnuts between the barn and yard's back hedge. The corner flower pot fell over, chipped, nearly broke, in the last good thunderstorm. What is left of the day lingers as the short and narrow bamboo rake meets pine needles in the Zoysia grass. The battery in the lawn mower has gone unused for too long and won't start.

I want to think it's just Holly tearing into my arms as I pass through this bursting yard. It's true there are birds at the feeder — thrush, larks, sparrows, a solitary yellow warbler — this is true. I find a wild, wind-blown pear at my feet; beneath its mottled green and brown skin flesh is ripening. Your American Elm is dropping leaves into the ivy-thick covered quartz. No one lives there.

Consider this an open letter; when I go touching, briefly what even the earth is unable to shake loose from her mouth.

The Promise of Being Biennial

Slumbering, an allium bulb
In extended overwintering,
Putting down roots during the dark months.
Then comes the unexpected heat.
March sun on the splintered steps,
Long necked pears in Italy,
Soles brushing summer water on the glacial pond.
The relief of being known,
Forgiveness for youth and age.
After interminable time in the soil,
I slip from under the brother of death —
Find my green way into this second spring.

Cicada Zen

yesterday
is the shell of the cicada
fragile, brown and hollow
left behind on the wall

sing in your green body now

Proxy

i.

I will answer forever to that unfinished sound:
rasping suck, then —

As when tulips come up too early in spring.
Fooled, unfurling just half way.

ii.

I rub your feet, whisper foolish things.
Just let go. You're free now.

Tape stretches over your mouth like wings
for eight days now — in the end, Mother

wants to fly in, say goodbye. I watch her chide
what's left of you about the Thanksgiving

you dropped the turkey on the kitchen floor,
the time your new car rolled downhill.

This is how she loves. I know this, but still —
I excuse myself from what is left of the two

of you, her odd memories, your body no more
than a machine, the air sucked in, turned

with your own blood, sent out again. Hypnotic
as a hymn, overheard on some gone Sunday,

as we sipped lemonade in the dark: *the leaves
are turning over* you say as I think *it's going to rain.*

We set our drinks on coasters. Rock mutely,
looking for stars. They unfurl in clusters. Pulse.

The Life of Rocks

I

in the middle of Shrewsbury the bell stone sits

many thought the world would end
before anyone explained how it got there

but it was pushed by glaciers
and the world is still here

still blanketed by the same thin layer of soil—
corroded rock, over shelves of cooled rock
that hiss, spit, belch, roll, and endlessly topple
around a three-dimensional sphere of molten stone
orbited by a stone satellite
like the electrons that we're made of

II

volcanoes skirt the margins of continental shelves
creating deep geothermal vents, that may have been the font of life
or not—as meteors have been found to carry sugars and amino acids

III

in the belly of Lechuguilla
gypsum crystals grow in the Chandelier Ballroom;
Australian zircons record time;
crystalline silicon computes—
and a computer program for playing chess
can be employed to choreograph a battle
as computer models of bumblebee behavior
compose methods of finding serial killers

some fossils, after three billion years
continue to speak through carbon signals—
there is always a message if you know how to listen

IV

limestone columns in Rome
are built of tiny Paleozoic creatures
for geology is the accumulation of small things
as is death
and bluffs sliced by rivers and highways
(the same hardened sediment of ancient ocean floor)
are the graves of these ancestors—are our ancestors
and from these graves we carve monuments
for the more recently departed
old stone in warm night air, often a man and woman together
male and female, like nouns in many Romantic tongues—
but in Ojibwe, nouns are either alive or dead
and their word for stone is alive

V

scientists and philosophers who study such distinctions
find it increasingly difficult

The Goldilocks Zone

It benefits no one to talk about the damage.
We manage to love one another through our scars.
When the first stuffed platypus arrived in London,
no one believed the animal existed,
insisted taxidermy had mated a duck and a beaver.
The poppy flower is equally
an umbrella to an ant
or an intruder in the brain
subsuming pain.
Do bees ever tire?
Do snakes regret crawling?
Do penguins and ostriches resent the sky?
Science calls this path around the sun
the "Goldilocks Zone," not too hot,
not too cold, just a soft enough bed of rocks
to sleep on and dream the fairy tale true.

Contributor's Notes

Jody Azzouni has published poems in *Sycamore Review*, *Blue Unicorn Review*, *Cider Press Review*, and many other journals. His published work can be found on azzouni.com. He teaches philosophy at Tufts Univ.

Doug Bolling is from Flossmoor, Illinois, and has appeared widely in literary journals including *Georgetown Review*, *Bluestem*, *Cider Press Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Connecticut River Review* among others.

Joseph Bruchac has published in hundreds of journals and anthologies over the past five decades, from *American Poetry Review* to *Zone Three*. His many honors include an NEA Poetry Fellowship and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas.

Joan Colby has over 950 poems in journals including *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Kansas Quarterly*. She has pub'd seven books of poetry and has won multiple awards from the IL Arts Council, among others.

David R. Cravens has an MA in English Lit from Southeast Missouri State U. He has pub'd in *EarthSpeak Magazine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, and others and received the St. Petersburg Review Prize in Poetry.

Lexa Hillyer received her MFA in poetry from Stonecoast at the U of Southern Maine. She has won the Inaugural Poetry Prize from *Tusculum Review* and the First Prize in Poetry from *Brick & Mortar Review*.

Sonja Johanson received a BA in Human Ecology from College of the Atlantic. She is currently the Training Coordinator for the Massachusetts Master Gardener Association.

Lissa Kiernan writes poetry and non-fiction and is poetry editor of *Arsenic Lobster Poetry Journal*. She has pub'd in *MiPOesias*, *unSplendid*, *The Yale Journal for the Humanities in Medicine* and others.

Matthew Brady Klitsch received an MFA in Poetry from Drew U and has poems appearing in *The Edison Literary Review*, *Bloodlotus* and others. He lives in Lebanon, NJ.

Jean LeBlanc teaches literature and writing at Sussex County Community College in Newton, NJ. She is pub'd in numerous journals and is editor of the Paulinskill Poetry Project. See www.jeanleblancpoetry.com.

Deb Liggett is a poet and essayist whose work has been pub'd in *Pilgrimage*, *Arctica*, and the anthology *50 Poems for Alaska*. She lives in Anchorage, AK.

Lyn Lifshin has pub'd 120 books and four edited anthologies as well as in numerous poems in most journals. She has two books forthcoming: *A Girl Goes into the Woods* (NYQ Books) and *For the Roses* (March Street).

George Looney has pub'd six books of poetry, the latest from Truman State UP titled *Monks Beginning to Waltz*. He is chair of the BFA program at Penn State Erie and editor of *Lake Effect*, an int'l literary journal.

Susan Maeder was co-editor of *Wood, Water, Air, Fire*, an anthology of women's voices from the North Coast of CA. Her book of poems, *White Song*, was published by Pot Shard Press. She lives in Mendocino, CA.

Mark A. Murphy has recently pub'd in *Poetry New Zealand*, *Poetry Scotland*, *The Tampa Review*, and many other int'l journals. His first book is pending from Salmon Poetry. He is from West Yorkshire in England.

Adam Penna has authored two books of poems and has poems appearing in many magazines. He teaches at Suffolk County Community College and lives in East Moriches with his wife.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, and many others, including *Albatross*.

Clara Quinlan earned her MFA from U of Montana and currently lives in Louisville, CO. She has work in *Amherst Review*, *Meridian*, *Nebraska Review*, and other journals. She enjoys mountain and ice climbing.

Don Russ is the author of *Dream Driving* (Kennesaw State UP, 2007) and the chapbook *Adam's Nap* (Billy Goat Press, 2005). He has just had a poem chosen for inclusion in *The Best American Poetry 2012*.

Dawn Sandahl is a Michigan writer and poet. She writes speculative fiction and poems about nature and memory. Her work has been in *Temenos* and *Editions Bibliotekos*.

Matthew J. Spireng has published five chapbooks, and his book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award. His book *What Focus Is* was pub'd in 2011 by Word Press.

Carole Stedronsky won the first Anabiosis Press chapbook contest back in 1991 with her book *Wolf Dream*. She lives in California and plays the bodhran (Irish drum). She is also an artist and a quilter.

David Thornbrugh is a Ring of Fire poet based in Seattle, WA who finds the idea of being a poet in America pretty funny.

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

The Anabiosis Press
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