

ALBATROSS



#25

“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

John McKernan	3
Alexander Levering Kern	4
Tim Cremin	5
Richard Brobst	6
Hannah Dellabella	8
Janet McCann	10
Christian Downes	11
Stephen Malin	13
Jane Stuart	15
Christine Anne Pratt	16
Carl Zettermeyer	17
Joan Kresich	18
David Polochanin	20
Kirk S. Westphal	21
Beth Suter	23
Kate M. Wells	24
Sonja Johanson	25
Mary Fitzpatrick	26
Contributor's Notes	27

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Genesis of Mud

Mother Dust
Father Water

Grandparents
Prince Proton
Princess Electron

All the mud pies & mud plates
In Nebraska
Tasted like the Snake in the Garden
And cracked in sunlight

The vase on my desk
With a white heron
Hovering in a light blue sky
Says *Look There is another way*
Above the Garden and beyond

Calcium Tablet from Bone Meal

White ice smooth host
Last bit of breakfast

Fragment
Of ox rib
Bull skull

How frail
You once were
Wisp of green grass
Soft kernels of corn

Some mornings
I squirm when I feel sunlight
Pour through the window
and tell these frail bones
Every bit of you was all once sunlight

Blow Your Horn and Ring the Bell

Every step's a small thanksgiving.
In a mere two years I've grown a tongue
and come to sing a stranger song.
With me now, the cedars sing
hosanna in familiar woods
while white pines cry *kyrie, kyrie*,
the crickets rehearse their *arias*,
and evergreen needles play brushstrokes across
the snare drum of my mind.

Sing one last song, you reservoir,
before the sun falls into the trees.
Sing notes the shapes of spiderwebs,
with treble clefs & higher C's.
Sing and breathe the autumn ghost,
you caravan keepers, watchers at night.
Teach me to walk each day in thanks.
Teach me, red maple, the scale of my life.

At Marston's Landing

The river god is trying to speak to you.
Not speak, exactly — maybe more like sing.
His rippled tongue is licking the banks,
causing trees to lean, cling to what's left,
their last leaves whispering like a light rain.
Walking along, you cross a braided brook
giggling over rocks; crickets discourse
on the subject of Octobered earth.
On the other side, a new construction site
grinds out its daily quota of steel noise.
It's hard to hear as just another strain
of the god's fluid music — maybe more
like shards of the glass silence shattering,
source of all sound, and all else flowing by.

Living With a Dying Man

I.

This summer has been unseasonable with rain.
The news has called it Biblical, and I tend to agree,
Yet it may only be that I am currently acute
To such signs and omens. Even now lightning
Forks out over the Gulf, near where the earth
Ends, sending a disciple to testify that nothing
Is ever totally forgotten. No thing will escape
Wholly overlooked. I look out at the gray
Curled in the clouds, curled around the street-
Lamps illuminated in mid-afternoon, swirling
Down the desolate street of no destination,
As thick as oil blowing across chiseled asphalt.
“This would be a perfect day to sleep,” I think.
This would be an ideal time to lie back
And float out of the dark room in the moistly spun uterus
Of thunder. And then I think of my wife, home
After eight hours of stocking beer bottles and mopping,
Coming home with dinner planned all out
And with no house key; and I think of my son,
Home from college courses, filled with a twenty-year-old’s
Bombasts or delicate mood, home after an evening shift
Serving at the senior citizens home for dementia.
And so I lie and lie back and close my eyes and wait.

II.

Here a different gray grows—the gray dust
That settles on the couch; the gray light
Of a dim lamp across the room always too
Dark to work; even the words recited back
Are heavy with gray and fall to the floor,
Crack like ceramic. No gray! Not tonight!
Tonight, when they arrive, I will laugh and
Talk and come out of my room and join them
And pretend that we are all still living. Perhaps,

A good movie would be in order, perhaps
Reminiscing about a past vacation when we all
Could walk the one half mile to Anna Ruby Falls
Or tube down the Chattahoochee. We will
Function as a family tonight. It is still possible
I tell myself, still, it is possible. Tonight they will
Not enter my room and have to turn away
With moist eyes and speak to me as lightly as a bird
And have
To pretend.

III.

The rain now has slackened by several degrees,
While the sun leaves only an echo of light and gray.
Capes rise up from ditches and fields, flutter
Off the dampness and feed upon the stars. It is so vast,
The universe, that is, and I think of black holes stretching
Energy, stretching time, where everything is curved and returns,
Eventually, in whatever form it takes. Tonight it will be easy
To be light, to be alive, to laugh again. Yes, to be so minute
Is to be alive! To be temporarily mortal is to be alive!
I sit back and wait for them to arrive. Tonight they will not know
That we are any different.

The Last Hallelujah

i.

My mother wishes I could believe
in something, as if faith is a hobby
like knitting.

ii.

We are Christmas-and-Easter
Catholics: two days
when my mother pretends
we still go to church every Sunday
like when I was young
and still knew the words
to the Hail Mary — she is
full of grace; I am
full of shit. Sometimes I wonder
if my parents gave me
my middle name as a prayer;
now Grace just seems like irony.

iii.

I have no god
to ask for forgiveness.
All I have
are empty pill bottles
like hymns that my mouth
can no longer sing.

My altar is a leather couch
in a therapist's office.

I preach to the choir
for one hundred and sixty dollars
an hour; the parish of health
insurance will not donate.

I receive communion
in folded hands: leaves
from a blue prescription pad.

*This is my body, which will
be given up for you.*

Amen.

This Is Not an Advertisement

My father would say, I feel a little
sick in the bell
and flip an alka-seltzer

into his empty whisky glass
and I liked the fizz and the way
it looked breaking up in water

flakes slowly floating to the bottom
I stole sips and loved the bitter
chalky taste hissing on my tongue

taste of adulthood more promising
than grandma's milky tea or chocolate
more like the golden drinks left in glasses

I sneaked down to sample
after the guests left—sharp, sour,
rotten-fruity, forbidden.

Once I stole the whole long round bottle,
put a disk in the toilet, put two
in the birdbath

some rudimentary sense
of self-preservation
stayed my hand above the fish tank

and somehow I never was found out
and Sunday nights, long after church
I had communion at midnight:

the wafer, the excited water,
the transformation, the homage.

Thousand Autumn Snow

—for Tu Fu

Wu Jinzhu, father of gardens,
cups the tender light
condensing at his thatched halo.

The swirled, burned tissue of his face, arms—
dawn on a small river—

earthenware hands tend
a moment in the sun's reminiscence,
a silent philosophy:

oriole in the roof tile hollow,
rain sheen of slender terra-cotta,

sky—with child and chipped shale—
softened gold in ghost-blossoms.

I close my eyes into the thousand autumn
snow of your arms,
made a moment in the sun's reminiscence.

Kindling

Sun and water made warmth
in the flicker and phantom at my hands.

Soon enough, I shall be drawn
into the fragrant cross-section of centuries,

and comfort the next day-worn explorer
with warmth and a chattering camp-stove,

or as risen prayer sown in smoke
to the ancient hours of night.

Perhaps my soul's been sewn
from several—and loosely bound—
unwound then
when silence comes as stillness
sounds.

The Herbalist

Doubled by metal tines, her
 troving hand plunged each damp depth
one by one to pry, wrench up,
scrape out hard holes all morning,
a strain that sweated her cold,

with scant help from a half-grey,
 watery sun, her dangling
hairends wet-bright from effort
of faith, dropped salt spots dark on
clods that attested a sage belief

in the balm of a waiting
return, begun again through
feverroot and the spring of
thyme to come, filled with grace from
its blistering, blessed kin.

On Going

An unleafed tree, shards of rock;
not bird nor blade disturbs
what seems the tomb's huge round.
Farmers used to burn off fields;
rabbits fled, found greener squares
or died and grew to mold.
The shadows of the valley of the dead
pervade the graveyard universe;
the single cemetery gapes,
and the seed drops silent for its wake.

Late Harvest

Leaves still cling but will turn, are turning,
brightness starts that will maze wood hill,
in unreaped fields colors flood and fade.

Frost-flowers light, early and few,
just brushing low ground, their
crystal horizons holding back
for a time, and the crops not in.

A flight or two of southbound birds
whose clouds come soon, snowclouds then,
with the harvest standing.

Skies go grey; arrowhead geese divide—
why they have waited, I wonder.
They too have waited. I wonder why,
Standing in the field ungathered.

Summer's Enchantment

Before last summer came, we thought of snow.
We both remembered how long winter was
And it was hard to see spring's gentle light
Although the trees were green and life was good.
This year, I wait for summer here alone—
You left when snow was gone but we found spring,
A little thing but bright from flowered hills,
Then such warm wind that rippled greening grass.
Summer brings starlight and a round full moon.
The owl cries in flight on forest nights.
The heavy rolling river sleeps in streams
But time stumbles under summer's crimson sun.
Earth is as beautiful as it first was;
Our love's enchantment keeps these hours true.

The Man from Vermont

He keeps his green plates and the old pick-up running,
plants saved seed: sunflower, corn, beans and squash;
and for the girlfriend, flowers to cut, herbs for the pot.

The man from Vermont is hungry and lean. He has
no fear of blade or writhing creature, goes barefoot
all summer, wields the scythe his father left him,

tells me these mushrooms laddering this tree
are best sautéed in butter. The kids from next door
are taught to chop kindling for sweet sap. They grab

flying wood like squirrels gather nuts. Now acorns
cease rattling the tin-roofed hut walled in on two sides
by fuel, and leaves grow thick on the garden plot.

Sometimes, on cold days, he plays fiddle tunes
he hears in the wind, glances at his girlfriend
knitting by the fire.

Who would be hungry like this?

In March, he will tap the sugar trees,
be master of fire all day, inhaling a maple mist

and when spring comes at last, he will feel his limbs
unlock like the brook behind the sugarhouse
unhinged from winter's ice.

Cowboy

The driver pulled in at eight a.m., which let us put one last milking in the bank. "Don't feed them in the morning," he'd said. "I don't want my truck all shitted up."

This was the end of granddad's dream:
an idyllic Ohio farm, the grass greener than Finland's,
the cows bearing names from the Old World:
Kolehmainen, Isso Valkonen, Väärä Sarvi . . .

Stroke cut him out of the picture and left
a spinster daughter and a schoolboy grandson
running things (down, it turned out) as best they could.
Death's meager mercy spared him this last act.

The dream was his, not mine, for whom
the hated work was never more than chores,
and disposing of the herd a grim but longed-for wish.

The bewildered cows stumbled across the empty
hay mow floor and rattled up the metal ramp
into the truck, the driver and I ushering them
out of their life and mine while my aunt,
refusing a role in this finale, cried bitterly in the house.

Down the drive and up the road. It was over, then.
The cows on their way to dinner rush and I to chemistry,
of which I remember little.

But the names . . .
the names graze my memory still, six decades since:

Kaisa, Ainikki, gargantuan Hirvi, doe-eyed, tranquil Peura.

The Bees and Their Flowers

The Army is trying to teach young soldiers
how to bounce back after trauma. Limbs twisted
off their axis, flesh burning like logs
in the fireplace, screams roiling the air.
All those with PTSD are costing millions.
Maybe there is a trick that can be taught.

But they've forgotten about the body. They don't know
a lover's touch on the inner arc of your thigh
once carried the whole history of love.
They don't know you could use your hands
to call pleasure down from the stars.

Your body is home now, but still saying stop.
After all the drenching tears, your body is still saying no.
Your ears are bent from the blast and then
that strange moment of silence almost like peace
just before everything shrieked, even ancient ferns
etched in rocks.

The Army can't help you escape your body,
your breath has refused to leave. The breath memory
is there, hunkered down. Your eyes soldier on, peering
into an ash colored world. But you can't leave
your eyes. You're still there behind them.

So we who live in our bodies will reach out
and when our fingers meet, touching
will be like scarlet, like gold, like indigo.
Touching will be like the bees telling
where the flowers are.

Breathing Together

may all beings breathe
may they breathe
the flowing silk air
may they feel their lungs
hold and release
again, again
may they breathe together
curled in safe burrows
in drafty stables where
horse breath turns white
with frost
may they breathe together
in the panting sprint
of predator and prey
pushing each breath
to the limit.

may we remember
that all beings breathe
may we look up and see
the white gull's belly
and breathe together
may we gently put our hand
on the flank of the goat
and feel it rise and fall.

may we hear the sound
under all sound
all beings breathing
all beings breathing together
may we know we are not alone
may we know we are held
in the gentle arms of breath.

The Animals Behind My Wall Are Preparing For Winter

They are whispering to each other right now,
though I can hear their bodies
and hushed voices
echo between the wood studs
and the cedar clapboard,
discussing the only things
on their mind at the moment —
food and weather —
knowing they have a safe place for the night,
yet at the same time not taking it for granted.
I hope they realize that their nest
is temporary, that they appreciate
the dry space that they return to.
I bang on the wall a few times
to let them know who's boss.
I hold the mortgage on this place
and I do the snow removal, too.
The taxes don't come cheap, either.
I've worked all my life to buy this house,
so you will not do damage here
or scare my children.
I'm an understanding man and agree
that we can all coexist.
We all have months ahead of us,
some more than others,
and a series of long, cold nights,
when the only thing
we can all do is survive
and absorb heat wherever we
can get it. So in the meantime
I might ask them
to keep it down a little,
staying out of sight, too,
wouldn't hurt, either,
and they'll have their place,
in my insulated wall,
and we can live together,
side by side, with only
this sheet rock between us.

The Dance

Out among the trees past midnight
moonlight and wood smoke
speak in ether tongues

"Why is it you love me?" asks the smoke.

"You turn me into rivers.
Without you I am still."

"And you, you hold me buoyant,
the weight of light is our discretion."

"You fill the space between the branches
with my wishes."

"I was once a tree like these
and knew your soft caress.
I chose to die to find you."

"I saw you then but could not taste you.
Now I sip you slowly."

"I flow across your lips
in the patterns of the grain
I knew beneath but never saw."

"And we become the shape and color
of water."

"And the sound of pearls
underneath all currents."

"Do you miss standing?"

"I am no longer afraid to fall."

"I used to whisper on your shoulder,
hoping you would hear."

“I felt the silver of your breath.”

“I was asking if one day
you would dance with me.”

Mt. Diablo Fire, September 2013

Today I smell smoke,
see haze on the horizon.

The summit smoulders with preparation:
an emptiness to let in light
for those of us germinated by fire

scorched by this life of bliss and flame—

like a pine cone once sealed with resin,
I was burned open, released,
my old life scattered like so many seeds.

Tomorrow: fire poppies
infused with smoke.

America

We are pressing on. Getting up
most mornings with breakfast
on a wooden table. A
table our grandfather
made with his own tools. We're getting
the kids to school. They learn there.
They learn counting and colors.
They learn about emancipation
and new deals and historic presidencies.
They manipulate polynomials and identify
logical fallacies and then some go to college
and some go to fight
and some go to factories, turning out wooden tables,
sanded, polished, stained. We produce.
We move on. We reach out across the distance
and listen. We lose each other in the flashing lights.
Unexpectedly, we find each other at the airport.
Our lips are still soft.
We sometimes see eye to eye.
We sometimes feel what it's like for the other.
And sometimes, we just walk away.
Out of work. Out of time.
Staring out the window at the neighborhood
trees turning all golden in the city sunset.
We know we will walk again in the wild spaces.
We will sleep under familiar stars
even
if we don't know their names.

Ezekiel

People keep pressing me to explain that night—
what I saw, the fire within the fire, one creature alive
with myriad faces, and all I can tell you is this:

We exist inversely with the stars. In these times
there is scarcely night, and we do not fear the desert.
The clamour of humanity, now many waters, floods

through the cities: we have the appetites of manticores,
we subsume the oceans. As children we could see
everything—dust motes revealed themselves

in the sunlight of our morning. Now we are blind;
the evening blazes. You ask me, but still,
I do not know under what throne we shall live.

Mary Fitzpatrick

When Elevation Predicts Survival

—for Tokelau, Kiribati, Tuvalu

O sea—
there is so little green
on you I put
my trust in life,
I live and breathe
and have my being
on earth
not water though she is
my source
of treasure
and storm. Small
green island,
I know you as
I do my wife sinking
in the rising sea
sinking
the harmony
of things we make
even words
our tongue
and who who
could take
the last boat?

Contributor's Notes

Richard Brobst is a retired English teacher who was born, raised and resides in Sarasota County, FL. He has pub'd in a wide variety of journals, reviews, and anthologies, including *The California Quarterly*, *The Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Florida in Verse: An Anthology*. Richard also has published three chapbooks.

Tim Cremin is a member of Grey Court Poets, and several of his poems are included in their 2013 anthology, *Songs from the Castle's Remains*. His poetry has appeared in *Methuen Life* and the *Eagle Tribune*.

Hannah Dellabella graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 2014 with degrees in creative writing and professional writing. She lives in Bayonne, NJ. Her work has previously appeared in *jmwv*, *Seltzer*, and the *Of Sand and Sand* anthology by Kind of a Hurricane Press.

Christian Downes is an MFA candidate for Poetry from Seattle Pacific University. He received Allegheny College's 2013 Poetry Prize and was recognized as an Outstanding Author by Nota Bene (2011). His work has appeared in *Town Creek Poetry*, *The Rectangle*, and others.

Mary Fitzpatrick has had poems featured in *Mississippi Review*, *Atlanta Review* and *North American Review* as contest finalists, and she has been published in *Agenda*, *The Dos Passos Review*, *ASKEW*, *The Georgetown Review*, and others.

Sonja Johanson currently serves as training coordinator for the MA Master Gardener Association. She has work appearing in *Albatross*, *Dandelion Farm*, and *Shot Glass Poetry*. Sonja divides her time between work in Massachusetts and her home in the mountains of Maine.

Alexander Levering Kirm is a poet, writer, educator, and Quaker environmental and peace activist who has published in *Georgetown Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Concho River Review*, and others.

Joan Kresich is a long time educator with 35 years in public schools in both general and special education. She currently works to bring restorative justice to her communities in Livingston, MT and Berkeley, CA.

Stephen Malin was selected for the *Southwest Review* half-century anthology and also has translated verse into Russian. He has also pub'd in *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Poetry Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, and others.

Janet McCann is a 1989 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship winner. She has taught at Texas A&M University since 1969 and has co-edited three anthologies. Her most recent poetry collection is *Emily's Dress* (Pecan Grove Press, 2004).

John McKernan grew up in Omaha, NE and is now retired after teaching many years at Marshall University. He (mostly) lives in WV where he edits ABZ Press. His most recent book is *Resurrection of the Dust: Selected Poems*. He has published in *The Atlantic Review*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, and many others.

David Polochanin is a teacher, poet, freelance writer and former journalist living in CT. His poems have appeared in *Toasted Cheese* and *Negative Suck* as well as in an anthology by Native West Press, and is forthcoming in *Sentence*.

Christine Anne Pratt is a retired early childhood ed teacher living in western MA with a background in theater, music, and psychology. Her work has appeared in *The Aurorean* and *Silkworm*.

Jane Stuart is from Greenup, KY. She has an M.A. degree in Classical Language and Literature and a Ph.D. in Italian Studies. She latches hooks, makes bread, and plays with the dog.

Beth Suter grew up in rural Missouri and lives in northern CA. She studied Environmental Science at U.C. Davis and has worked as a naturalist and teacher. She is also an award-winning poet and has pieces in *The American River Review*, *Tule Review*, and *The Avocet*.

Kate M. Wells teaches English at a small charter high school in Placerville, CA. Her work has appeared in *Rattlesnake Review*, *Ash Canyon Review*, and *Poetry Motel*.

Kirk S. Westphal is an environmental consultant living outside of Boston. He has written for many technical journals on water management, but by night he writes poetry and nonfiction. His poems have appeared in *Dunes Review*, *The Road Not Taken*, and on NPR. He is also the author of a nonfiction book titled *Ordinary Games* to be pub'd in June 2015.

Carl Zettelmeyer is a graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. He lives in West Palm Beach, FL.

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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