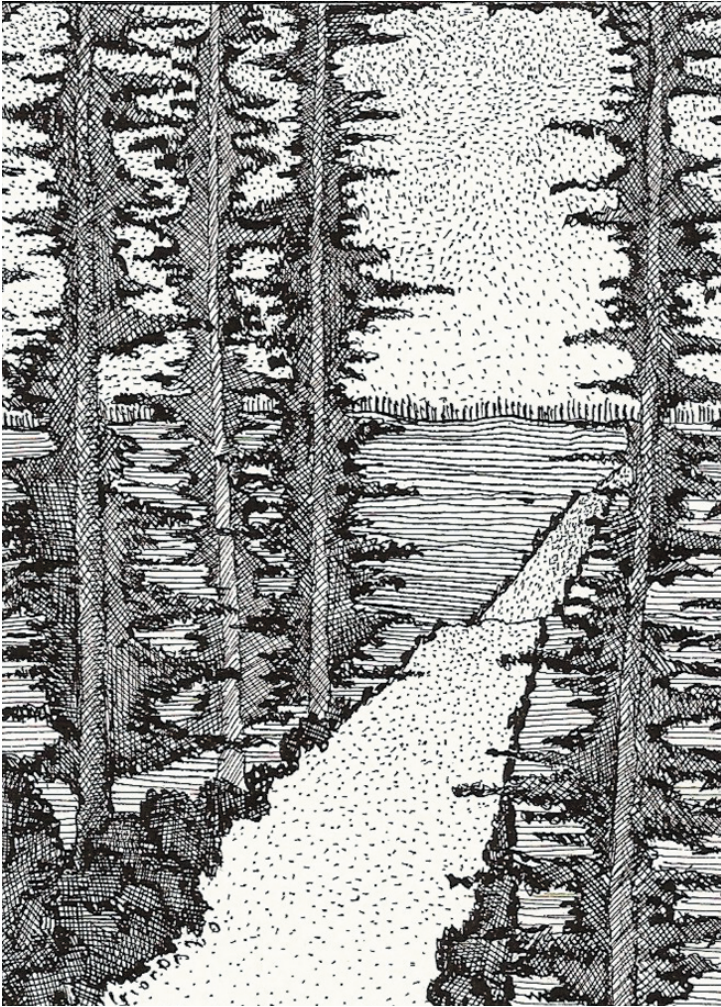


ALBATROSS



“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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ALBATROSS

#19

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Loss

Dwindling, superfluous
 among cheap seconds of growth,
 ferns splayed
 at the base in a rummage
and a stag's rack of thorn and berry,
 the stump glares
like an idol in the Polynesian scrub.

Left after clearcut,
 a man's five-ten from the ground,
 surviving
 ox-haul and burn-over, the corings
of ants and rain's dicker, the stump
 looks back four times
 the rings of human weathering
 to the lightning it soared above
in a forest of gods and canoes.

I arrive at this ghost the axe spared,
 this gist of the brutalized
 fir sawed to mast
 schooners sunk off Cochin,
come as one bearing messages from the contrite,
 the stump-legged,
 the sailors of merchantmen,
the culpable founders, all those buntinged
 and bronzed as if
 their short greedy lives really mattered,

come to sense what it means to feel a wind
 scuttle through branches
 severed long since, green
 vein and bone, to feel
the sun warming a vanished arm, a lost hand
 reaching, to stand
 as if this were a throne
or the fragment of an Annunciation,
 to bend, to kneel down, to pray.

We Shades

In this landscape the power poles
are live things, perfect cylinders that sprout
from tarry roots, spiracles of creosote,
pungent transpiration,
and each trunk's canopy a bright cone
of photons, mercury blue-white,
brassy sodium that streams
to bleached earth while the skin

of dogwood and crepe myrtle peels
and flakes like an old sailor's,
twig litter offspring castoffs
around bony ankles,
one slant cracked arm, its palm
upturned in supplication.

Remembering A Maine Shore

Deliver me ten million
glacial rocks
and I'll make you a shore.

Let me spill them
between land and sea.

Hills can look down on them.
Waves slap against their
dark grey turrets.

But I'll have the weight
to snap the Atlantic rhythm
into heads of foam,
shudder the fir roots
in mute abeyance.

Come along,
sit on a flat, worn boulder,
dangle toes, lift up head,
feel west wind dry
what east wind soaks.

Give me the parts
and I'll contrive you
a blessed whole.

It's years since
I've been home
and my heart
needs the exercise.

Blackberries

I have a weakness for blackberries
in poems. I haven't eaten them for years,
a traitor to raspberries, I suppose.
Though their descriptions
of ripeness remind me of something—

there's much to be said for stealing
berries from a neighbor's yard.
The poems I like best
use blackberries and stealing,
probably something to do with sex
and death. Maybe
the something is this—
blackberries hold some sweetness, some sour
as all poems must
as the owners of blackberry poems must
work from the inside of round flesh
and be on the verge of bursting.

Elegy for an Angelito

—In Mexican peasant tradition, when a young child dies, it is believed that the soul of the innocent little one immediately joins the angels in Heaven and becomes an “angelito.”

I.

Today I feel nothing; the uterus,
practical and elastic, snaps back
to its first shape; snaps
back—that muscular pear.
Today I feel nothing. I say this
though I hear an old man warning: *Good poetess,
do not write elegies to your small losses.*
But if I am to be a poet, should
the uterus be more than emptied? Filled
with pebbles to jam the machinery,
its cycles choked off
in mid-song? Or should it be cut out
years before the night-sweat
of menopause?
Sing then, gifted sisters, if
you sing to women; sing for my angelito
who died too formless for a grave.
You know what it's like to squat
pushing up skinny, whittled branches, to let go
a small bundle
for music's sake. You must have felt
your hearts, sore
with desire for children returning
with the apple blossom.

II.

My hand was a clamshell, playing
an Atlantic lullaby; I heard my life pulse
through bone, a cacophony
from dry land. I was cold-blooded, aquatic—
dorsal fin, lateral line, protective
adipose layer, the pearl
formed around a sand grain—
a hidden luminaria
between the knees. I remember
a handome rider, sleek, with a headful
of loose dark hair, his mouth, his eyes,

promising the thrill of the hunt, and tremors
from a hundred galloping hooves;
with a pack of hounds, he said,
on to a rabbit's scent. He called me his
cold water-girl, his hardhearted doll,
as I shivered and flapped
bare pelican wings, then caught up
in motion I crooned
in his ear; and how for an instant
I found myself black—
moving in a leopard's skin, clawing
his slender back, the claws
withdrawing; my
hands.

One night we drove
to a park with loaves of bread for the wintering
ducks. He stood on the frozen
pond, three buttons on his shirt undone.
The ducks ate from my hands,
impatient, biting at my skirt and lifting
the hem with their beaks, while he yelled
to me across the cracking
ice. But love's a brat, and wakes up
in the morning long before anyone.
When a piece of moon still hung
in the sky, I went
to his unmade bed—
the scamp had already gone outside
to play. I found him near a bush.
He showed me his curled-up
lip and stuck-out tongue,
his face stained purple
from eating raspberries.

III.

Where do you sleep, Angelito?
In a mountain cave with Endymion, nursed
by a celestial mother, and hush-a-byed
with silvery kisses? Is her palm sturdy, is
she cautious of your tender fontanel?
May she send you to green pastures, sliding
down a rainbow, with ten fingers

and all your toes. And may she keep you
from Lamia, who is mother
to her own dry bones,
her breathless womb. Or maybe you walk with a dog
through Mitla's winding roads, running
over platforms, among the rows of
monuments. Or you're lying in a basket,
on someone else's porch swing, the wind
rocking you, a father
drawing pictures in the sand: owl, wolf
and coyote. A spotted fawn makes his way
through the forest—Angelito! He's bowlegged
and shiny with afterbirth.

But my cradle is empty. I walk among
Aztec women who grease their bellies and eat
what they desire. They chase me
out of the house of midwives.
I bear a cradle on my shoulders, and under
the blankets—the bloodless weight
of an arrowhead. They say I've created
strange children, my root cut clean: gone
are my pleasures, my new moons. I walk
with a weeping woman over thorns and weeds, pleading
with the hills to cover us—
then back to a lake,
wailing, *Oh my children!*

Sleepless I rise—
roam the city, following
the backs of men, imagining
the color of an eye, shape
of a nose, calculating
the earshot.

The watchmen trip me, think
they've mouse-trapped a whore, by
the heels, by the stockings
they peel.

In my bed I look
for him: a voice
calling me to open, open—
but at the door stands
secret darkness, holding

down its heavy tongue. The sheets
tangle me, tie me
to the pillow, leave me
struggling for breath.
My heartbeat frightens me,
flutters like a bird
against the ribcage, drowning
in thick air.

IV.

In the valley,
wood always breaks into field, farms
abandoned after harvest.
Under an old barn ceiling, brushing
aside webs, uterine
wall whisked by broom, our heads
scrape its peak; see
fat-bellied widows with birthmarks,
the yolk of eggs.

We grew up sinless, clean
and original, suffering miscarriages, spontaneous
ruptures, feeling the density
that comes from omission,
the lowered heads in our laps.

There's another field back
of here. Pretend something stands
near the hay mound. Two hawks
circle above—they too may perceive
a new form, moving in its own
atmospheric skin, color of
any open jar of tempera. Walk
as if abstaining,
only from the anticipated
hoax; silkweed pod
split open, milkseeds parachuting. Little stones
can trip; rabbits tremble
underneath the swirled grass, holding their breath
until we pass. Run with the stream, follow
the river bank, visualize
what rides
the undulating water

V.

Return—Jerusalem girl. Come out,
you sun-burned bride, come
from the lion's mouth, the leopard
mountains, with your honeymilk
tongue, with spikenard,
saffron, sweet
calamus and cinnamon, aloes
and myrrh. Bring
your fragrant woods and perfume.
Let the children sing:

*The horsemen are in the ocean—
The prophetess will dance, jingling her tambourine—
They are sinking to the bottom
like stones.*

The Shepherd

The sky a clay-fired blue
bull's blood squeezes your stomach
mixed with incense in the slaughterhouse air.

Untie the tethered goat & take him down
the coiled path through the hills
past the groves, the shepherds, the broken stones

to the desert stretched like parchment beneath
an unrepentant, indifferent sky.
Watch the salt-clotted stars grind round.

In the morning leave him to heat & hunger
the circling birds counting time
sigh, start your long walk back to town.

Row Boat

She would have been sixteen this year.
Or, he. Our hands would have held
a slippery grip. A wet oar.

Knowing about *leavings*

we would resent the implications
of licenses. Instead,

my father, who is not a grandfather,
reminds me of the time he took me
out in a row boat. We caught Sunfish.

How my mother stood on the shore
cursing the dark clouds;
cursing my father's hands

that took us further from her,
made us small.

How inconsistent
his love is. Coming in moments.
Like good reception. Like seasons.

Like sun that emerges rather than shines.
His rage showed up the same way.
That *child* wasn't the only
one we lost.

The sloughing of cells.
Tiny lives that spontaneously abort.

Maybe we didn't want this enough.
This chance to worry about boats
and clouds. Hands.

The Turn

Let us remember this time
how, at the beginning of our days
of going back into the earth, we dip ourselves
in gold light. How the ladders of trees
steady themselves, they set
their small hooves, and hold out
their beautiful arms for us, above the fading grass,
pale now, and empty
as the hair of wind.

Let us go down, into the earth,
drinking light as we descend. Let the hills of us
go deep this time,
like the shaggy bulk of animals, let our roots weave
and cross like the swaying light of lanterns
traveling down a darkened gravel road.

It will be cold among the knuckled stones
and it is always easy to forget
we have ever been anywhere else.
Let our mouths, when we look up
be filled with stars.

Resurrection on the 4th of July

I can't reach anyone anymore,
bound hand and foot by graveclothes.

On the deck under the grapevines
a tall thin man who makes flowerboxes
from fallen tree branches
offers me half a Weiss beer
with a slice of lemon in a paper cup.

I avoid my husband, my old friends.
They don't see the miracle,
they only recoil from the stench
of what's over.

I sit on the cooler
till someone needs another beer,
then plunge my dead fingers into the ice
for a stranger.

My face is bound about by a napkin
to keep my jaw from hanging open

in perpetual awe.

The man who writes about jazz
gives me a plate of blackberries.
One by one they dissolve on my tongue.
My belly still functions, my womb lunges for a child
running down the wooden steps.

Fireworks begin in the alley,
a great spoked wheel of flame
between the fence boards.

No one notices the light.
Maybe I've come too far from the stone.

The End of the Garden

You must forgive me
for loving the tumbled garden, the end
of the zinnias, bent or leaning,
curved like the new covenant,
each new green stem sprung from the main brown stem
standing up straight toward the sun,
each tight new bud holding its secret
pink or orange against the blue-gray sky.

No one wants to discuss death
but now the four o-clocks open before dawn.
Moonflowers swallow the darkened day.
We don't have to sneak out at night to see them!

Everything is sweet.
The air is sweet.

Yes, the flowers bow down to the earth.
When they nod their heads
they are seeding the spring with wild calendula,
forget-me-not, yellow cosmos, blue cornflower.
When they shake their heads, it is the same.
It is no use resisting.
You, too, will embrace the earth.

The Shade Garden

How few of us care to know it.

Sweet woodruff's even green
and jaunty bursts of bloodroot

here where skeletal stems
of winterberry assume the architecture
of islands.

Sun lives as contrast—
astilbes give flesh to the flame
of light entering.

Light, an ornament,
dapples leaves in drifts.
Hostas define perspective.

The smell, loam, sweet decay,
leaves jangle with the dry air of fall,
the last sights of late summer:

turtlehead a spume of pink,
daylily scapes dead in their reach,
inflorescence of sedge—

tinsel shimmer of a cobweb.

Persephone to Hades

In the far cavern, I found
a broken blue teacup among your coins.

Why do you keep such a delicate bowl?
One jagged gap, sky-colored, is ripped from the rim.

You're deep, I understand. God of the dead, always busy,
a hand in every pot, in the flesh of a pomegranate.

I roam the caves, looking for the smell of earth,
while you count business transactions in seeds.

Two souls guard the receipt box, one soul
counts, one whispers, wet lips to my ear,

that you once lived in your father's stomach
with a stone. O Hades, money man, the wealth

of the dead ferments in your caves. I forget
your shrewdness each evening. Each morning,

I pick at the gypsum packed under my nails.
I've planted this shard, sky blue, to make it sprout.

Prelude

Come winter. Autumn pockets
her colors, pulls up
the once warm roots
and hunches southward: A gray,
drained hand rises. Shadow. Shadow.
It stops the blood. It stops
the brain's fragile traffic. It stops

a buck, rumping a doe
grazing near fast water. He lifts
a tentative hoof and peers.
Every November that he began
waiting to starve is coming in
on the cold purpose of this wind.

And I, blown back years, am counting
the times I could not keep from turning
to check, midstep,
the footprints strung behind
in the climbing snow.

False Spring

The sky's indecisive this morning,
A blurred gray that's not quite cloud,
But enough to knock ten degrees off the forecast.

The new grass is hesitant & waits
Barely above ground:
A late chill could ruin everything.

I've been watching a flock of wild ducks
Lose confidence, flying back & forth
Until their tenuous V disintegrates

& they come back down to earth,
Confused, fluttering like leaves
Blown a thousand miles before they fall.

It's not only instinct, is it?
Even the hardwired birds have to make choices.
Sometimes they're wrong.

a bird will rest its feet only in flight

you cut your teeth on magnificent desolation
iced tire ruts down the avenue
each day new the way a cat wakes to the unremembered

what you've inherited is a terrible logic
the physics of perfection
cloud promises immaculate as white language

how could you know this?
you are still dancing
between what is true and the body's deep remembering

postage sent
along with sweet oranges
lined notebooks padded envelopes

in photos you carry no luggage
arms full of flowers flame red
under tongue tablets in small fists

these saving things
yield to memory
prove your undoing

The Clouds All Fall to Earth

the only time
everything
is the same color

our feet are imprinted
on this page
by morning a breeze

could shift the white
blow it away
like fluff of a dandelion

but right now
you can trace our steps
in the light of the moon

to a melting field
with stubble of corn
spelling something

in the white

Past Harvests

Now that the last poplars have been removed
and your fields are exposed to the Michigan
winds, I can understand how the green succumbs
to the biting winters. It wakes in you
like the outlying rows that have gone
wild, weaving their grassy fingers through the briar
until the seed is choked, where even the desire
to save them admits to their fleeting song.

It's been a long time since we walked those fields
together. But the moon seems at rest when
it passes the meadow without its usual
shape. I suppose there's a recognition it feels
in the listless slumber, in the dying end
of past harvests, in the shed holding your old tools.

Harrodsburg Road

Sitting in a stalled line of cars
while dull orange machines grate
the crooked road wide and straight,
a road after two hundred years
too risky for our quickened pace,
I see along its asphalt elbows
styrofoam crosses, plastic wreaths,
and their sermon on observation.

I recall Grandpa and Uncle Dale,
keepers of the family farm,
driving to town, slow as a tractor,
their conversations about the height
of soybeans, the heritage of a jersey
raking her head across barbed wire,
the tree line along the Snow's barn
lane, all the details brought back
to Grandma, laying down the lunch
on the oilclothed table, pouring ice tea.

As my car idles, I see the yellow tape
around my favorite sycamore,
the empty foaling field, the stretch
of limestone fence I never passed
too fast to admire, all cleared away
for a four-lane through the country,
fifteen flat, gray miles—no need
to keep to the speed limit for that.

"Whistle, Sing, Talk"

I've been taught to walk quietly
in the Catskills, that to observe the mammals
and birds I must never scare them off

by being loud. As a teen, I walked into the woods
on dew-dampened leaves to perch silently
on a fallen tree and, pretending to hunt,

watch what came around. So noisy people on the trails
would annoy me, chasing what I came to see.
This, though, is Montana. The grizzlies do not like

to be surprised. "Whistle, sing, talk on the trails,"
guide books advise. I'll remember as I trek
up the trail from the Gallatin beside Specimen Creek

that now is a time to be raucously human,
not to quietly blend in with nature
lest nature take me for her own.

Hubris

It is always the same story,
told over and over through the ages:
how some person comes to feel proud,
satisfied.
And the gods stand up and tell him to kneel,
and he kneels.

It doesn't have to be a great transgression.
It can be as mild and forgiveable
as thinking you know how your life
 will turn out.
But before long
you are living in a place you never imagined
 you'd live.
You are taking your anniversary roses
 down to the river,
and giving them to the river.

The gods have stood up and told you to kneel.
And you kneel.

Barry Ballard is from Burleson, TX and has poetry appearing most recently in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Connecticut Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. His most recent collection is *A Body Speaks Through Fence Lines* (Pudding House 2006).

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Harvey Molloy is a writer and teacher living in Wellington, New Zealand, where he teaches at Porirua College. His poems have appeared in *Albatross*, *Bravado*, *Jaam*, *NZ Listener*, and *Takahe*. In 2004 he won the New Zealand International Poetry Competition.

Caitlin Rice lives and studies in Lewisburg, PA and Aurora, NY. She is the recipient in 2006 of the Catherine B. DePau Prize from the American Academy of Poets awarded through Wells College.

Megan Roberts is currently pursuing a Masters in English from East Carolina U. Her flash fiction has recently appeared online at 971MENU.com.

Matthew J. Spireng has published nearly 500 poems in such journals as *The American Scholar*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *English Journal*, and he has published four chapbooks, most recently *Young Farmer* (Finishing Line Press 2007). A full-length book manuscript *Out of Body* was pub'd in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State U. He has previously pub'd in *Albatross*.

Kelly Terwilliger has had poems appear in *Hunger Mountain*, *Poet Lore*, *The Potomac Review*, *The Connecticut River Review*, and *California Quarterly*. She lives in Eugene, OR and works as a storyteller and artist-in-residence in local schools.

Don Thompson has had work pub'd in *Atlanta Review*, *North Dakota Review*, *JAMA*, *Marlboro Review*, and others. He has pub'd three chapbooks, most recently *Turning Sixty* from Pudding House, and has a book forthcoming from Parallel Press (U of Wisconsin). He teaches in a prison and adjunct at area community colleges where he lives in Buttonwillow, CA.

Gabriel Welsch authored the poetry collection *Dirt and All Its Dense Labor*, pub'd in 2006. He has had poems and stories appear in *Georgia Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Spoon River*, *Missouri Review*, and several other journals.

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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