

# 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.

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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*

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*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,

\*

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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.

Joseph Bruchac

---

*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

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**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](http://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](http://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.

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**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

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