

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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Night Falls

Oh, red star, pale moon,
the leaf's underbelly
soft and dark,

veins, forked and true,
driving blood to the very
heart of the matter.

oh, lost and scattered loves,
oh, God of Some Sort,
gather us together

here beneath the falling night.

Miracles

“When God makes the impossible possible.”

—*Pulp Fiction*

An old priest once told me that there were three things needed
for a miracle:

faith, prayer, and purity.

The first and last left me long ago,
but I still pray because it is all that is left to do,

and who knows, it might help, and certainly can't harm.
I pray for those I want to love, for health, for luck,

and time for some wondrous event.
I can't feel my heart is in it. It doesn't open

as it used to open wide when under a Minnesota sky,
the smell of hay and cow manure heavy in the cool

morning air, while I walked to the barn where the cows—
miraculously—always gave milk.

Vespers

There comes a time when you decide *that's the way it is*
and *how beautiful for that*, and you wonder
why it's so easy to believe that, just now, when
for the last thirteen years you've suffered
under the gloom you'd suffered for eleven years
before the twelve years before these. *What is*
the calculus of attitude? you wonder more, and why
desecrate with pouting such an evening of a slow-
coming spring in mid-May, the lilacs slowly appearing
as in a film of evening clouds dying from cotton
to lilac to violet above a sunset ocean, as in a picture,
only prettier. And the green grass like a carpet
of grass, lush and carpety, super-real in its super-greenness.
Even the pole of the laundry tree glows like some thawed
memory of ice, elemental in its naked steeliness as anything
naked is, and even the prognosis that it could be the last
steel laundry tree you'll ever own — world catastrophe
around the corner, the subsequent dearth of iron
or anything mineable, miners gone hungry, machines dead,
the implosion of history and its subsequent crater
where a cottage industry should have devolved —
none of that can dissuade its cold blue beauty. Just as
the bubbles rising in the waters of the hot tub
you lie in after your wearying workday blazon
their effects of pressure and color — pearl in this particular
light, shadowed and illumined by sky, roof, and wall,
and a leafy maple nearby, and two dilatory walnuts
just budding, and occasional sparrows chasing down
mayflies — despite the fact that the power to run
the pump implicates your wife and you in a profligacy
of nuclear and fossil-fuel dependent lifestyles that gradually
(though faster now) spell out your dooms, even
as you count your blessings. Tomorrow, all your letters
to senators will be tallied and filed. The multitudes
will transfer their hunger from one pocket to another
and back, again. The generals will kiss their wives,
and their wives will kiss them back, again. Yet tonight,
still, everything murmurs and winks, as if holy.

Sometimes I Take Becoming a Monk

Sometimes I take becoming a monk
seriously for two hours, even three.
It's just the idea of devotion
because I have no faith in God.
It's all random, I believe,
no unifying force beyond
magnetic pull, gravity, natural attraction.
In no way is this a religious poem,
something about God, or the lack of.
Make no mistake about that.
I fiercely believe in Charles Darwin,
the gospel of Whitman sounding his
barbaric yawp over rooftops and trees,
a brown and yellow striped sparrow at the feeder.
This is the idea of devotion
to a craft fiercely applied.
This is appetite, hunger for seed.
This is donning the robe at four in the morning
after three hours of furious sleep.
I think of Darwin as a young man
crawling through the East Essex marsh
on his hands and knees, storing a spotted frog
in his mouth because his hands and pockets
were already full.
Poetry is the taste of the frog.

Ants In Our Time

Earlier, I wasted half an hour
Watching ants do nothing

But stand around, gesturing
With feelers like cigarettes.

The thin smoke of their idleness
Drifted above them.

It was sad, disturbing,
But I had to tell you about it.

Something has gone wrong
With the world.

Elk Hills, Morning

Something about the light
Reassures us. See how

It brings life to the barren hills,
How the ridgeline

Hunches its shoulders
To receive it, and the shadows

All lift their cupped hands,
Waiting to be filled.

Early Light in Erie

Morning, reflected, assumes these buildings the way gulls
assume the ambivalent sky at the edge of the bay

blocks north. The chatter of gulls here is less cacophony
and more a lonesome blues riff strummed lazy on

an acoustic guitar salvaged from a dusty second-hand shop
for less than ten bucks. All that's constructed dissolves

in this light. All movement's a huddling together,
an embrace, romantic. A woman throws stale bread

to gulls and the rock doves we call pigeons, and the birds
ignore each other in the rush and stuttering of wings.

Give us this day our daily bread, this woman says, having
chosen kindness. I'd like to say this early light has

chosen to illuminate these buildings. That every music,
whether composed or the result of a moment's collusion

of disparate sounds, is an urgent declaration of compassion,
instinctual or not. The bay I could walk to in ten minutes

should be more than enough to cleanse what we say
is inside us—the soul. Reflected off the vastness

of windows meant to reveal what's inside, this light
seems to burn enough to consume the world in fire.

This has to be enough to purify the soul, and to join
everything in this moment in a gesture that blesses it all.

Palimpsest Vespers

Wrens wring dirges out of a sky where nothing musical
lasts for long, their innumerable bodies brittle notes,

embellishment for some sorrow we cannot bear. Such
lift and flurry of feathers and grace is almost enough

to convince someone heading home in this
bird-infested dusk to start to dance. Say it's a woman.

Say a lover she left years ago has died and she is
remembering a night when, naked and damp in bed,

they listened to the blessed varieties of evening bird-song,
those winged vespers with furious hearts, and tried

to mimic each in turn between bouts of laughter
and kisses. Say nothing for her since has matched

the music they made as his fingers slipped inside her
and his mouth found hers again and the bird cries

continued out in the evening as if in accompaniment.
Say the past is nothing but the soundtrack for loss.

The Opera Singer's Contract

Today the work is too much. She's not sure
she should stay. She takes a break alone, walks
two blocks to the pond, although her feet ache
from standing and standing. October, the clouds
nearly transparent against the darkening
sky; the fish and frogs have all hidden
under the dull metal surface in the murk.
On upper branches, the static of dead oak
leaves in the breeze: minutes before call,
her vigil in the voiceless landscape
seems wasted. Then a rustle and hush of wings.
A blue heron lifts its huge, light frame,
shoving itself up toward the horizon, long
legs trailing behind, a final signature.

Creeks, Birds: Eastern Sierra Triplet

—Eastern Sierras, June 2009

Green-tailed towhees

perch on the tips of yellow
flowering bitterbrush.
Their burnt sienna crowns flare
to bright crests at the wind's nudge.

Olive wings quiver,
white throats flash,
songs carry
across sun-washed sage.

And McGree Creek gallops
in spring abandon
down from the white-peaked pass
through aspen and cottonwood.

The green of the glade so green.
The cascade inside gone wild.

Violet-green and rough-winged swallows

race the curves of Lee Vining Creek
above the limpid mystery of snowmelt,
slipping their shadows silk-like
over sand and gravel.

Cold Tioga wind ruffles the creek's skin,
but dark-backed trout calmly discern,
from the deep black boils of pools,
what passes above, rising to eat.

Nothing idle but all still,
a thirst deeper
than the body's assuaged,
a greater hunger filled.

When in the presence
of the vibrant still,
I remember how I once answered
to my older name.

Ash-throated flycatcher

at the edge of aspens,
her home-branch on a dead tree.
Thunder mingles
with the voices of Hilton Creek.

You want to believe you are
hearing the breath of mountains
as it exhales down the slopes
toward the basin, season to season.

That breath carries the echo
of the return of flycatcher to limb,
and the way ice changes to rush of creek
to find its way back to the sea.

in march

when the herons return

 they sound
angry

 snakes ascend
the basement stairs

 blackbirds, back
like the plague
infest

 the wind-hollowed fields
and i
 who have promised

 to love this earth

 what will i do

now that the smell of wet oak bark
 no longer

 comforts me?

Black Song for a Christening

There's no time, my love,
no time. There has never been
time, but especially now. Don't
you feel it? Tree roots stir, shake free
the earth. Shall I count who has left us
and who remains? Golden toads, pike
blue as evening, clouds of cranes
that float from the sky like parachutists. Look
fast. It's a time inside time, it is
our time. The ripped sky,
the gouged and poisoned earth delivered
into our hands. Our lives delivered.
Our hands. What gifts
can I give you and how should we
speak to each other,
meeting like this, the room crowded,
sequined and daggered, and all eyes
upon us? Listen—there are things
you think you know. Know them.
The world will prick you and you will fall
as if dead; you will wander through your life
like a sleepwalker. You will lose everything
the others have given you. Let it go.
Let them go, toy grandmothers, their shimmer
and sheen, the string in back
that makes them sing. No time!
Patient as the dying, wait
for what comes in darkness to wake you.

April Fog

The wind picks up
the day it's supposed
to rise into the
upper sixties. Clouds

boil. The pond goes
pewter. Ripples dark
as basaltic lava.
You can measure light

by what's gone,
throwing corn
past crushed berries,
the only light and the

bellies of geese
tipped to dive
for those
gold beads

Over the Silky Black

like dead moving
into a dream.

Only the moon's
lips, a silver
tongue. The gulls

glide, seem to
float in their
sleep past brown

roses, their
shapes pale as
bone, the

only flash of
white in darkness

On the Day of the Longest Night

I could have been the
young girl waiting for darkness,

wanting to escape
the flowered bedroom.

For nights I
dreamed the warm

belly, lips.
This is not love

rubbed up against a
blond boy near

his locker, the
ripple of muscles, not

a football star.
The escape, not to some

parked car, lover's
lane with a stolen six

pack but for the bracelet
of my thighs, a

dark bay to fly
where no one flies over

quilts of the sleeping,
night eyes of animals,

glide in the blue
moon over black pines,

the last light in rooms,
dark rhinestones

For the Roses

I think of her watching the
last rose petals on a
day like today, say deep
August, browning like
an old rubber doll
she might have left
in an attic in Canada.
I think of her pressing
skin against glass, a sense
of summertime falling,
that sense of fall
that Sylvia Plath
wrote of. Or maybe some
freeze frame of what
is going, moving on.
I see her pale arms,
sea mist velvet jeans
hugging hips that
never will not be boyish.
In the wind, gone
voices move close
to her cheek bones. In
this frame she could be in
a fancy 30's gown. Some
thing is raw, some thing
is broken. It has to be
a full moon
etching black water.
She has to know that
from what is torn
and scarred, some
thing almost too
exquisitely beautiful
is already stirring,
some thing dark
as coal becoming
diamond, insistent,
dying to be born.

Loosestrife

Yes, all around Montgomery,
true to its name, in marshes
half-frozen and flooded in March
when I was through here, now
in mid-August, all that was bog
and dank weight has gone up
in red-purple flares.
They're showing us how:
Tell the sin that pits your insides
like gravel wheel-spun and spun
against metal; unhammer the spike
from the heart of what
you can't have or change,
let your wounds open like mouths and
bellow, bellow, and the strain unrolls.
Your flesh chills when you see it:
the color of something unburdened
burning

The Last Hour of the First Day of February

I'm standing flanked by two tall bushes
I planted just to feel branches surround me,
as if I, too, were rooted, watching small starlight
revolve overhead, playing with darkness,
the way today's record high toyed with winter air.
Most snow melted, I walked to the side yard,
each step spongy, yielding weight a meager inch
of turf, till frozen ground held solid, implacable,
as if it knows snow is forecast. I'm wedged here,
absorbing air between these leaf-bare Rose
of Sharons taller than any man when I hear
foot-falls, not loud, not brash, almost delicate.
Two deer step close enough to hug.
I freeze. The smell of wild fur in my mouth.
My beard tingling and sprouting. Their easy pace
continues under stars suddenly brighter,
the slim moon almost a smile, an exhale of joy.

The Godwit's Resolve

A nest in the Yukon Delta—
the godwit's fist of soggy tundra
lined with reindeer lichen.

Tuned to a magnetic field,
she orbits the Pacific on stippled wings,
coded for song and sky.

Too vee, too vee—
non-stop across the Yellow Sea, rewriting datelines.
She knows the moving point of midnight

and every archipelago—where she is
where she wants to go.

Berkeley Gardens

Light soaks the sleeves of an old woman's
blouse, infuses thinning bones, frayed
canvas slippers, as she kneels to weed
her parcel, aligned in a grid at city's edge.

Scarlet runner beans entwine buckets'
rusty handles, the eager teeth of rakes.
Translucent moonflower reaches
for a second story row.

Tucked inside the woman's fists
like gold nuggets mined for posterity
the season's first sword bean,
basil leaf, sprig of thyme.

A Violent Sound in Almost Every Place #19

The flower
is a flower,

stays a flower
unless the rush

becomes
too much

for the root.
Shaken to be

as much beast
as holder

of the petals,
the decision

to tide oneself
is always costly.

A Violent Sound in Almost Every Place #123

Hull of my war, wolf skins
& seasons of roots reaching
for more cover, loud winter

always knows that active
hands are never foreign
to the pointed sounds,

the bleeding that fills all
cavities. My light bones
are warm, weighted by this.

Pennsylvania Barn

Another race, our grandfolk,
who built barns of rock,
thick shake roofs that
leaked sun and air,
shrank tight at raintouch;
from axe and adze
the locked oak beams,
walking-wide,
the two-plank doors,
chestnut, horse broad;
springwater troughed
in one great hewn stone.
Today, these one-foot
neon letters, never
dark, spelling out
“Antiques.” For thirst,
a coke machine.

At Ambergris Cay

Trim, short-sleeve-uniformed,
he pilots his inboard motorboat
in and out among the snorkelers,

enforcing. Don't stand on coral.
This long stretch of it
is second only to Australia's.

We in the water, vacationing,
come from north of Rio Grande
so we're expansive by nature,

and indifferent in our wellness
to fragilities
as we watch for barracuda.

Yet we lift our masked heads
to respect this trim guy,
working while we play,

and all whose work
is to stop things getting botched,
all who tend.

Animals Sheltered in a High Houseboat in a Bottle

we are now at sea
only here on probation

weed water high as wallflowers
fill the sea with tumbled men

count the kindling crows
and words in ruin

listen. put on light break

latch summer in a whale:
float men in me

in the day the world.
but, at night, we

that one sleep sound the sea made,
then stopped

listen. put on morning

barefoot accident and beast
breaks into boatloads

bird caging approaches

a famous ship warped to a rotting quay:
the floorboards of the ballroom open up

the merman will rise to you
the hour you sink to him

We Inherit Sidereal Cities

it all began so easy:
the knocking down of your houses,

the bricks upon the floor;
a florist adds a flower

a midnight echo
a forest fire

then something breaks
at the end of the street.

we whose kingdom
has not come

and always building more

tearing down the house

it is enough Father
wearing down my heels
the city now declaring
draining draining
there is nothing left to drain

chug of the bulldozer tearing down
my sleep twenty four hundred miles away

fertile land where you grew fat tomatoes
purple mums as big as your head
starter plant now twenty foot palm tree

there is more Father
but my feet have not caught up to this time

so i go
with worn heels
doing what will bring me back to tomorrow

forgive me Father

Gary Blankenburg is a retired English teacher living in Sparks, MD. He has authored seven books of poetry and short fiction, the latest being *Dancing with Strangers* from Dolphin-Moon Press. His Ph.D. dissertation at Carnegie-Mellon treated the "confessional poets."

John Paul Calavitta has work appearing or forthcoming in *Mudlark Review*, *Camas*, *Cortland Review*, among others. He is a Ph.D. candidate in English and poetry at the University of Washington, where he received his MFA in Creative Writing.

K. Lauren de Boer is an essayist and poet living in Walnut Creek, CA. He was executive editor of *EarthLight* and has published a number of nature essays, most recently in the Sierra Club Books anthology *Eco-therapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* and *Parabola Magazine*.

Darren C. Demaree has had poems appear or forthcoming in *South Carolina Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and others. He is the author of *As We Refer to Our Bodies* (2013) and *Not for Art Nor Prayer* (2014), both to be published by 8th House Publishing House.

Marcia L. Hurlow teaches creative writing at Asbury University and has poems published or forthcoming in *River Styx*, *Cincinnati Poetry Review*, *English Journal*, and others. Her first full-length book, *Anomie*, was published in 2005, and her latest collection is *Green Man in Suburbia* (2010). She has previously published in *Albatross*.

Susan Deborah King has an MDiv and teaches at various institutions in the Minneapolis area. She has pub'd three books of poetry, the latest being *Bog Orchids, Island Poems* (2010), and has published in such journals as *Prairie Schooner*, *Zone 3*, and *Spoon River Quarterly*, among others. She has given readings all over the country, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, Oregon, Virginia, Minnesota, and Washington D.C.

Lyn Lifshin has accomplished far too much to fit into a short bio note. See her website www.lynlifshin.com for more information. She has previously published in *Albatross*.

George Looney is chair of the BFA in Creative Writing program at Penn State Erie and editor of *Lake Effect*. He has published six books, the latest being *Monks Beginning to Waltz* from Truman State UP (2012). He has previously published in *Albatross*.

Stephen Malin has poems in *Sewanee Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Antioch Review*, and many others. Anthologized in the *Southwest Review's* half-century anthology and in *Poetry Southeast*, more of his work, translated into Russian, was reprinted abroad in *Amerika Illustrated*.

Jennifer Markell has poems in *The Aurorean*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Rhino*, among others. A chapbook, *Leaving the Green Elm Market*, was published by Sheltering Pines Press (2005) and a full-length book, *Samsara*, is forthcoming from WordTech Communications.

Debbie McIntyre has published in *Ship of Fools*, *Iconoclast*, and *Art Times*, among others. Presently living in Gresham, OR, she plans to get back to her native Texas as soon as possible.

Gary Metras has authored four books of poetry, most recently *Captive in the Here* (Cervena Barva Press 2013), and 13 chapbooks, most recently *Two Bloods: Fly Fishing Poems* (Split Oak Press 2010), and is editor, publisher, and letterpress printer of Adastra Press.

Amy Newday holds an MFA in Poetry from Western Michigan U and has poems in *Poetry East*, *Rhino*, *Calyx*, *Notre Dame Review* and others. She runs a small sustainable vegetable farm in Shelbyville, Michigan, and teaches and directs the writing center at Kalamazoo College.

T.P. Perrin published his first book of poems, *SNARGE*, in 2011. His next, a rhymed and metrical English version of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, was published in 2012. He has previously pub'd in *Albatross*.

Andy Roberts is a poet and guitarist from Columbus, Ohio, who makes his living as an accountant and social worker. Recent pubs include *Atlanta Review*, *Fulcrum*, and *Plainsongs*. He has previously pub'd in *Albatross*.

David Ruekberg lives near Rochester, NY, and teaches English in the IB program at Hilton High School. He has an MFA from Warren Wilson College and has enjoyed a residency at Jentel Arts in Sheridan, WY. Publications include *Yankee*, *Poet Lore*, *North American Review* et al.

Don Thompson is retired from teaching in the prison system in the southern San Joaquin Valley area, where he has lived most of his life. He has been publishing since the 1960s. Seven books published in this century include *Been There, Done That* (2002) and *Turning Sixty* (2006). He has previously published in *Albatross*.

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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