

EGG ISLAND ALMANAC  
POEMS

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For Ellen Baer Galvin,  
in Loving Memory  
1935-2014  
“We had so much fun together.”

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#### ORDNANCE

Ever see one of these before?  
McDaid tossed me a hard plug,  
weightier than the ignorance

I'd attached like a water balloon  
to the phrase "rubber bullet."

It's January now, but winter and summer  
I keep coming across these balloons

flashing colors like visual noise  
in the marshes, and in pine groves  
that trap their sheen.

Bobbing and nodding, candy-apple red,  
this one is metallic, tangled and raising  
its black-and-white eyeballs to high heaven

from thickets surrounding the kettle pond.

It couldn't shatter a kneecap or femur  
like the ordnance on McDaid's kitchen table.

Set free to advertise some birthday boy  
important enough to inflict his name

and shiny future on a south-facing  
arrangement of water and trees,  
this time of year this balloon

may never get to strangle a turtle,  
let alone get sucked down  
the blowhole of a dolphin.

DUETS

During the blizzard, before the wren came,

I was not thinking about islands with bananaquits  
and frigatebirds and an occasional taste  
of the local rum. Of all those eighty million  
Americans under that red zone on  
the weather channel, I thought only  
of you on Stage Harbor, my Love.

Things began appearing in twos.  
Foxes first, after the seeds and suet crumbs  
knocked from the feeders by wind,  
one lightfooting it over the dunes of snow,  
a parent perhaps, lush in its color and coat,  
and the second maybe a shaggy youngster.

Rumpled twins next, a duet of bluebirds  
on the deck rail, the wind still thumping, then  
a downy woodpecker on one side  
of the hanging suet cake and on the other  
the wren, a carolina by its white supercilium.

Anything else with wings kept the house  
between it and that banging wind, but the wren  
puffed up on a branch like a tennis ball  
that spent last week in a retriever's mouth.  
Then to the suet for more. The wren  
like a high-rise window cleaner swinging,  
the walkway dangling loose.

Finally the woodpecker escaped through a scrim  
of ocean effect snow. The bluebirds and foxes  
already vanished, I promised I would be here  
for you alone, Love, persistent as the wren,  
who kept coming back, wind be damned, this storm's  
emblem for heart, chipping that suet cake to a slice  
thin as morning toast while the night kept coming.

SEEING STARS

“J’ai appris que les morts ne quittent jamais les vivants.”

Philippe Claudel

Was I twelve when that girl’s hand  
first came shyly over my shoulder  
from the row behind, the B-flick  
love story conning us both? Above us  
the gum-wrapper foils were shooting  
across the Rialto’s projector beam  
like meteorites to wish a future on.  
Whatever her name was, we were  
too young for her to be one of the women  
I vowed to change every cell of my  
nature for, though later there were  
a few collisions of equal and opposite  
outlooks, two crimped faces spurting  
self-regard like oil, two voices  
leaking steam under a moon we created  
so we could howl it down. I needed you  
to pry the rocks from my hands. Thank you  
for never looking at me these forty-eight years  
as though I were some fish who just  
walked into our house on my new feet.  
Though I know where reason says  
you should be, on the first night  
of the blizzard I climbed into  
your hospital bed in the living room  
for only the hint of you that might

--

yet be there. And again the second night,  
but this evening as the snow moves off  
you are here with me again. You look in  
at me for this quarter-hour of sunset,  
companionable star, and I at you,  
Dear Love, knowing where you are  
as you travel the sky-space  
between two pine crowns.

#### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

If these were sand dunes I could tell you  
which prints were a coyote's or fox's  
or dog's, but they're dunes in a fresh-fallen  
snowscape dashed by anything fleeing the cold.  
Take these imprints with nothing between  
them but white space. No feet, as though  
someone kept dropping and retrieving  
a computer mouse and cord. A leaper,  
for sure, but since they are hibernators  
it wasn't a jumping mouse. Maybe  
a white-footed. Or a house mouse, that despised one who allegedly performs

a birdlike overture while courting,  
a song you can hear if you're real close,  
they claim, and why not? It's as possible  
as that time years ago when I collared my dog  
as he stood over a screaming cottontail.  
Both could be as true as this weather that's  
tweaking the house like a nutcracker for a way in.

#### LIMBO

Two in the troughs the wind made  
in snow drifting across the deck,  
taking their chances since yesterday  
for sunflower seeds the cardinals  
and chickadees knock from the feeder,

two bobwhite quail who bail out  
but fly back again because there are  
feet of snow over my brushpiles  
where they might have a chance--

her dead-grass yellowish throat  
and eyestreak, their colors of winter oakleaf  
and snow-striped branches--

against the redtailed hawks and that yearling  
coyote I saw floating up the fireroad,  
so quick it barely touched down  
long enough to leave snowprints.

Given what comes from the air  
without warning, and out of the marshes,  
I know that longevity means nothing  
for them, but where are they? All day the souls  
of children in Limbo have troubled me,

that savage human neverland  
that's too much theology for a handful  
of feathers defending a heartbeat  
while this white absence rumbles through.

#### TO A FRUIT FLY IN WINTER

A splash of Oban on the rocks had me  
traveling in mind to its namesake ferry port,  
the way out to Mull and Barra-- Oban,

with McCaig's unfinished Colosseum  
on the hill above the harbor, a scheme to bring  
honest labor to 19th century crofters.

Then you appeared on the edge of my  
single-malted breath, *Drosophila*  
*melanogaster*, black-bellied dew lover.

I had thought to rid the house of your kind  
by leaving the compost bucket open  
outside for a minute to the January stars,

watching the lot of you ascend to vanishing  
a foot above the rim, poor astronauts.

Though I cannot order you to visit the neighbors  
the way my old-country grandmother  
commanded the radio, sick of its blather,

I fixed a glass of Fly Wine, red plonk  
doctored with a drop of detergent  
to break the surface tension so you'd drown,

even shut the oven door and hit the bake buttons  
after you'd spent the night inside  
carousing on banana peels,

but here you are, apparently immortal,  
drawn to my Oban's West Highland  
bouquet, a dew lover indeed.

## A JANUARY HERON

If you were really Camerarius's  
emblem of the wise man who takes steps  
against misfortune, you wouldn't  
be here today. You're not  
the medieval stand-in for  
the oversexed, either, unless  
this river ice colored like the sky  
promotes abstinence.

Whisky weather, and you're grounded  
over there like the negative  
of a marsh-side cedar, puffed  
feathers maximizing insulation.  
Close enough, I think I might hear  
this wind piping down  
your hollow bones.

For your allegiance to this place  
where the osprey's only a rumor,  
in my Speculum Mundi  
or Wild Guess at the World  
you have the power of remembering  
beyond geese who splayfoot it down  
only when the water's open,  
and the second sight to project  
yourself lifting sideways out of  
this marsh, displaying  
a Jurassic shape to summer.

## POST OFFICE PARKING LOT, FEBRUARY

Age doesn't come to call,  
but knocks us into side-angle-side  
whiteheads and blue-hairs with canes.  
As the wind adds an extra stagger

to my step, I think of you, Turkana Boy,  
rescued two-million years too late  
from the sediments around a Kenyan lake  
and given its name, your real name  
among the savanna dwellers  
probably unable to be spoken, maybe  
some ornate motion of a hand in the air.

You seemed to spring upright and modern  
in your body, nothing remotely as human  
before you, proof of Huxley's view  
that Nature makes jumps. Not one of us  
in this parking lot earned our gait  
dodging the big cats of the grasslands  
or snatching a child from one, more likely  
from living on the clock under gravity.  
Falling out of bilateral symmetry,  
I keep you in mind as sand falls  
through my hourglass and I move like  
I just fell out of a tree,  
trying my luck on the ground.

## CABIN FEVER

1.

That candidate whose face on TV  
seemed a mattress abandoned  
to his spirit's vacant lot  
drove me out to the woodpile.

Breaking into rounds of cold oak,  
trying not to think of meretricious  
skulls, I gave up and set the axe aside,  
and began listening to the grove

creaking here and there, the slight  
groans and sighs of pitch pines and oaks,  
the breeze weaving higher branches  
together, locusts playing off one another,

a reasonable music, neither  
electronic nor human, until a redbelly

began heckling from a pine crown,  
a reminder to gather my splits

and build a fire in the stove before  
the first flakes, to knot up Metro  
and Sunday Styles before snow  
oversimplified the paths and woodshed,

to attend the flames as though  
back in a time when humanity  
had little as companionable.

2.

The blizzard inside the hurricane,  
or is it the hurricane inside the blizzard?  
In all this banging and flapping  
a god within another god has ordered

the spruces to bow down and peppered  
these windows with salt spray. Can there be  
an "I" in this storm surge rolling the coast  
over until stumps of that ancient cedar swamp

appear briefly again, proof that the sea  
when it's ready will take us back, as the air  
and its waters took the cedar fenceposts back.  
What of the juncos and nuthatches out there

exploring interstices of ice, the sparrows  
and chickadees in their workaday coveralls.  
The light dives for zero, and the clock  
drips each second like a plumber's nightmare.

Time to consider how far those birds have flown  
from T. rex. In the woodstove window a face  
keeps appearing, almost familiar. We too  
are made of carbon and flames.

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

It's as strange as someone gluing a human head  
onto the middle ape in a timeline picture  
demonstrating the stages from beast to hominid,

the way this peacock struts among the ranks  
of eleven wild turkeys, the local flock,  
spreading his fan like a stained-glass window  
you'd think his envious drab cousins  
would try to fly right through.

He likes his lovin' on the exotic side,  
declares a man we call the Passionate Plumber,  
and Mrs. Baker claims he attacked the colors  
of her dress, says he's the Judas you'll find in any dozen,  
and won't scatter split corn for him

as Mrs. Caruso does, so he comes running  
to her porch, mornings when the troop's  
in her neighborhood, and will wait for her there.

Some are remembering that Mexican parrot,  
its lime-green vivid as its screech all one fall  
against our pines, and that pit bull who wintered over  
in the National Seashore.

One even

claims  
to have seen something prehistoric on the beach,  
which is perhaps to say  
it's your own fault if your day is dull.  
(stanza break)

Peafowl strays show up from India, the books report,  
but I'm betting on some fop's summer garden,  
McMansion and bird abandoned  
for Greenwich or Darien.

February now, and things no one can wait for or predict  
climb out of the ordinary  
nut-rich hollows, cross the roads, fly in a low line  
over marshgrass, and we stop  
breathless and look, lavishly bushwhacked.

MARCH 11, 50 DEGREES

Along the route fall took  
four months ago,  
something is loping  
cross-field toward you,  
getting barked off farms.  
The first plover of the year  
knows it and takes off  
piping like a cork  
worked in a bottleneck,  
and now you will have to  
stand your ground alone  
while something forces  
thickets, splashing among  
dead leaves, and half white,  
half mud, a heap of old snow,  
the runt of the litter  
looks back once, heading north.

## AN EGG ISLAND EQUINOX

There is no radical shift of light  
or redwings calling areas of marsh  
their territories yet, nor plovers  
probing for copepods. Only a yellow  
front-end loader laying out a new berm  
on the beach, from tubes too heavy  
to be called hoses, its audience one man  
and his protesting dog. No frosted  
wedding cake on tour, no Cap'n  
Beauregard hailing us from  
the Texas deck, no Texas deck,  
just an unshaven crew launching zodiacs  
from the county dredge, its twin stacks  
staining itself and the air with smoke,  
as battered an emblem of hope as any other.  
So spring comes to Egg Island, squealing  
and unwilling. Sulfur and diesel,  
flywheel, gear and grind until one morning  
the equinox dawns and silences  
the whole shebang.

## A SEA PIECE

That snowy owl up on the moors,  
using an electrical meter box  
for her rodent stand--what sense  
does she make of the disc  
that's turning beneath her feet,  
the annular way of things?

Even this dowel stamped with

numbers must mean something  
somewhere, but tumbled onto  
the winter beach it's a mere  
synecdoche for a list or logbook,  
like all those initialed and coded  
parts bumbling around out there  
with no one to decipher them.

Marconi late in life believed  
that every attempt at speech  
was up there yet in sound waves  
going around the earth, waiting  
to be tapped into by the future's  
headphones, but never concluded  
that such a babel of tongues mostly  
lost would be heard as gibberish.

#### ASTONISHMENT

When it arrives, it's more likely  
to seem a sparrow bedraggled by  
three days of rain than some  
day-glo lightning bolt, a wild  
underhang of feathers  
below its tricolor brown, black  
and white. Until you notice  
it's way too hefty, the beak is  
pink and wrong, and that's not  
the sparrow's grab-and-go at  
the feeder: it is hanging around  
as if lost, a blow-in on a northeast  
storm who has followed the locals  
to a seed source, its white eyestripe  
and lunula at first perhaps  
a Sam Peabody bird's, only then  
the astonishment that it may be  
from Thule or Flatey. Though it  
matches up with photos  
of stragglers to the Aleutians  
and Orkneys, there's been  
no sighting of its kind here ever.  
Ordinary where it lives, for an hour

it's a godsend from the marvelous,  
not for anyone caught in  
a type-A lifelist competition.

#### THE JACKRABBIT'S EARS

It's a damn poor mind that can only think of  
one way to spell a word. --Andrew Jackson

The years are placed at the upper part of the head  
and very near each other. -- Meriwether Lewis, Codex Q

And grow nearer as we grow older, with memory  
up there entangling events and revising faces,  
reaching into the story that will be our lives,  
though the years are very flexible  
and have been known to sponsor surprises,  
a hurricane in December, blizzards in May,  
and weathers that trip outlandish blossomings.

The front outer fold of the year is a reddish brown,  
except one inch at the tip of the year which is black,  
though I can remember whole blue years  
that seemed like exhaustive studies  
in roadside gravel, and that black inch  
should be fair warning the next twelve months  
won't be a romp through the Kingdom of the Sun.

When the years are thrown back they don't break down  
and recycle like compost, returning themselves  
to us a day at a time, but more like boomerangs  
they startle with their sudden reprises of people,  
scenes, ancient slights either magnified  
or better understood, and the motives of others  
coming clearer with time.

Meriwether Lewis, you were the first  
to describe the Hare of the Prairie or jackrabbit  
fleet enough to be Time's logo. Spelling be damned,  
you breathed air clearer than anyone will again,  
saw buffalo herds without apparent end,  
and worked with Thomas Jefferson,

yet given to melancholy, you died young  
on the Natchez Trace, probably by  
your own hand, as though you saw  
how the years were like that yellow bear  
of Montana, gutshot and lungshot, who stayed  
in the chase and would not fail.

#### LEFTY'S GAME

Maybe you wouldn't call it  
a ballgame, but there's a red ball  
and he gets all four feet  
four feet or more off the ground  
when it's necessary to field it,  
and one time in twenty  
will deliver it back to my hand.

Sometimes he just drops it  
and loops through the pine grove,  
lopes the route he's worn  
among berry bushes and scrub,  
dead-aimed at the ball,

and other times charges me  
showing no ball, but serious teeth,  
like he's going to eat me up,  
a move converted from  
canine memory into play.

As he passes close I slap his back  
to reward this work he's created  
for himself, as other border collies  
have invented their own games,  
no rules we understand,

no sense of innocence or wrong  
for us to work around, just a few  
personal habits to be acknowledged,  
and the look in his eyes when  
he catches me singing "Shenandoah."

THE FISH CROWS

As the alewives arrive,  
the forsythia lights itself,  
and soon shadbush will whiten  
by the rivers where shad appear.

But what's the signal for fish crows?  
Me, apparently, splitting my last  
layer of firewood as a weak  
note, a tinny yawk

sounds above me, then its echo,  
kazoo-like, then all the guests  
leaving a New-Year's party,  
blowing their toy horns  
though it's nearly April.

Fish crows: usually one or two  
will be traveling with their larger cousins,  
who keep above it all, out of range,  
or loiter in the breakdown lane.

But here for the first time in my  
three quarters of a century  
is a whole flock of fish crows  
celebrating a new beginning.

Hard to imagine them unwrapping  
grief like a gift on a morning like this,  
corporeal subdividers like their  
relatives, while the lilacs

prepare to announce that bluebacks  
are beginning to thread their way  
up the herring runs.

## TOTEMS

I live between the heron and the wren...

-- Roethke

Maybe I should downsize and opt for the wren  
at my age, though the heron enlisted me  
on a May afternoon in 1965. North Pamet Road,  
delivering shrubbery for a landscaper,

a great blue in that kettle pond  
by the overgrown cranberry bog, tallest  
and stillest, the genius of the place.  
That day I knew distractions would not  
be fatal to my hopes here.

The wren is disarming though, lifting  
its throat and letting go at the sky  
so you have to clutch in surprise  
whatever you're holding. I love how  
at nesting time its warning buzz can make  
strangers look around for the rattlesnake.

Would it be presumption or even desertion  
to shift my needs onto it? It must weigh  
only about as much as the heron's  
kneecap, and the great blue is perfect for  
the flat, long trip across distance,  
the overview, its cronk matter-of-fact.

If I go quietly in winter the heron  
may hold its ground twenty feet away.

Never have I had a bad day with one sailing  
on the margins--it can mean good mail  
at the P.O. that afternoon, for instance.

Ah, but the wren goes here and there,  
twitching at details among the haiku tidbits,  
and it's only the owl Mutterkin who demands  
from the grove that I choose which of the two.

## SUPERHERO

At roadside this morning the discarded  
paper latte cups outnumbered  
the empty nips of Jim Beam. Summer  
was well on its way, and shortly  
a whirring person, mantis-thin,  
appeared on a bicycle scrolled with  
a flow of vowels approximating  
Aeolia, a vehicle slim as a stringed  
instrument designed and tuned by  
a maestro of silver micro-tools,

its rider wrapped-up tight  
as if in the flags of several principalities.  
Under the myrmidon helmet  
he took on a visage as he passed  
without a nod and disappeared  
up the road, no doubt to dismount  
and face-off against a monstrous affliction  
somewhere, while I stood among  
the new yellowthroats and fiddleheads,  
hearing the first black-billed  
cuckoo of the year and wondering  
whether a walk  
is always only a walk.

#### A FEW QUESTIONS FOR BEN FRANKLIN

This wild tom picking his way  
along the roadside looks as  
absurd and un-American  
as the grand recessional  
of a royal wedding, and seems  
unaware that his black cloak,  
set against that forsythia's  
pyrotechnics, makes a target.

What were you thinking, Ben,  
when you nominated the wild turkey  
for our national bird? That any  
purblind musketeer could  
bring down that family-sized  
hump of light and dark meat?

He's out here under the aegis of Fish  
and Game, but looks as unaffiliated  
as Baba Yaga, her hut aloft  
on bony legs, herself her home,  
until he lifts that blue  
question mark of neck and head,  
and in self-doubt appears composed  
of parts a Yankee farmer grafted

cleverly enough to charge admission.

Ego-involved yourself, first foxy  
grandfather of the republic,  
did you foresee how fledged with  
self-regard we'd become, our country  
stepping out like him,  
as confident as any true believer  
bearing that pageantry onto route 6?

#### A DOMESTIC ARRANGEMENT

The jays seemed to work from nine to five  
and break for an hour around noon,  
both of them bringing snippets  
of last year's bean runners, dried catbriar,  
fragments of rootlet and bine,  
which she worried into shape as though

weaving a beard for that pine trunk  
twenty feet from this window. When  
the nestlings broke into this world,  
skinheads, pink omnivorous yawps,  
their father stood guard. Not fondly,  
I'd surmise from his barbed head, but not  
shrieking either, on a branch he'd  
otherwise issue threats from. The way  
he sat in on the nest for her looked like  
rudimentary parenthood--as if they could  
turn and live the way we do. He held her  
in his regard so you'd think he saw  
bark scale and sky and moss tuning  
themselves to her jay blues. Berserkers,  
she wasn't long kept from spearing  
a foreign egg clutch, and he'd rip away  
at some little flower of carnage pinned  
with his feet. One day the empty nest  
looked not quite like absolute zero, but ratty  
and somehow Whitmanian, as though  
the good gray poet himself had invented  
this whole arrangement, then hung  
his beard in the tree and gone home.

## THE JUNE LIGHT IN LOCUST GROVES

If you will believe that these robins and catbirds  
drunkenly wobbling from the feast of  
the trees' solstitial flowering  
are blinking as though to dispel much more  
than those little weddings before their eyes,

I will believe you have seen a woman  
fixing blossoms in her hair, and grinding corn,  
and a man chipping a tool from a likely stone.

When you said you had dreamed one night  
that the Algonquians were readying for winter  
in this south-facing hollow again,

where each fall we chunk out  
the dead locust trunks that will glow  
like ingots in our stove, trying to bake  
lifetimes of Atlantic weather  
from our bones, I knew

it wasn't only the grass fed by nitrogen-fixing  
bacteria in the nodes of locust roots  
that creates this light on June evenings.

There must be a midden of oystershell  
and fishbones under this grove  
where you saw those first people

moving among houses of woven mat  
above the turtle pond, and crouched at a fire pit  
lined with stones those ancient cook-fires  
turned orange and pink, and speaking  
a tongue no one living  
has heard in his waking life.

REBUILDING A WOODPILE AT THE SUMMER SOLSTICE

in memory

of George Garrett

It must be a strain of residual Yankee in me, that advises  
it's best to prepare for whatever eventualities  
we can, though I won't climb to the flue to plunge  
and retrieve a wire brush until cold has caught the bees.

Things turned elegaic when I began to play  
a memory game with the garden,  
stacking one split of oak for the squash plants  
laying their tripwires a month from here,

then an elbow of applewood for bean blossoms like  
the bee-sting lips on old movie vamps,  
and one log for that insect I spot two or three times  
a summer, that looks like a sparkplug

with wires twisted on for legs and antennae,  
its buzz and crackle suggesting technology.  
So it went, top to bottom, no sign of rodent nests  
or a coachwhip snake hauling its braid out of sight.

Prying the bottom layer, there was bleached grass,  
and rolypoly bugs, mushroom territory come September.  
I should have done this on a day when frost is curing  
the final pole beans to strips of leather.

Lord, if it's possible for those seeming originals  
to rise out of punkwood and sawdust for a few days,  
I mean the mushroom like an orange on a stick  
and the one like a brass-studded leather biker's cap,

maybe it's possible that after my longest flight,  
in need of fortification, I'll walk into a paneled lounge  
as I did once at Logan Airport and your servant  
George will turn from the bar again  
with the sun in his smile and a new story.

## CAPERCAILLIE

We're going to walk in and come around  
behind them this morning, and drive them before us  
out toward the car park, he says,  
slate-blue birds the size of American turkeys,  
fast on the ground, with noisy flapping takeoffs.  
He's never not seen them here  
in this nook of the Grampians, so we step off  
smartly behind his shouldered scope and tripod.

They'll tilt between these  
thick pines, spectacular,  
their cries like someone retching,  
then a pulled-cork pop ending  
in a rhythmic wheezing gargle.  
Swaybellied,  
a half-mile in he's huffing himself  
lobster-faced under his deerstalker cap,  
a home guard in some  
J. Arthur Rank farce, defending his village  
against the Axis. Everybody happy?  
Everybody happy? We believe only in  
the pursuit of happiness, Mrs. Darby mumbles  
at him, and not in the capercaillie,  
though she's bird-ready  
from her tweed cap to her suction-cup soles.

Now he's after us to keep quiet,  
spread out and skirt the bog  
to its end, then we'll turn  
and herd them before us.  
Red highland cattle's  
the only herd an hour later.  
Unfenced, postcard-ready,  
but in truth cutely disposed  
to use their horns.  
Weak eyes in every shaggy head,  
I'm praying, and--Christ Jesus!--he's in  
the bog to his knees, crashing tussock  
to tussock, arm-waving us to spread out  
as we make the trees and turn.

Alert for croak, pop, wheeze, gurgle,  
we've lost Mrs. Darby somewhere in our rising  
and dropping across the knolls another hour,

until the lost graveyard of  
cannibalized lorries, fenderless Morrises,  
mixed spruce and birch thriving  
through yawns of bonnet and door--  
and Mrs. Darby waiting to say  
there is no such bird as the capercaillie,  
"horse of the woods."  
It's only the Scots' envy of our turkey,  
and the Gaelic name translates  
for her to "goosechase," related to  
deerstalker's pals over single malts  
chewy with Spey water and peat after we've gone.

And to "snipe hunt" for me:  
I am a Tenderfoot with flashlight  
and burlap bag again, crouched in a midnight  
thicket of memory, except here comes  
a chaffinch, gray-blue helmeted,  
commonest of its kind,  
to wait at my feet for any crumb,  
its salmon-colored breast offering  
a change of heart, to follow me anywhere.

## JULY HAILSTORM

Because I remembered New Orleans after  
a five-day rain, Canal Street and Tchoupitoulas  
stocked with wading spoonbills  
and ibises out of the bayous, even a few  
unidentifiables spinning and jumping in puddles,

I went down to the marsh behind Egg Island  
at first light, the clouds such scumbled mixes,  
such baroque scrollworks and smears  
I couldn't tell you if they were  
cirrostratus or nimbostratus.

I went to the shell flats hoping for more than  
just the usual courage of terns  
in the face of a buzzard over their  
nesting grounds, because after 3 a.m.  
a wind had begun trying

as if by osmosis to draw the bedroom curtains  
through the screens, then lightning,  
thunder, then something on the roof and skylights  
like bushels of marbles poured,  
cat's eyes and agates rattling.

I thought of those pellets rising  
and falling in the storm, building  
layer by layer so at dawn  
there were holes in my squash plants.

Back of Egg Island the sand had been pocked  
and pummeled to a new softness, and I scared up  
a pied blow-in, chocolate and white, who beat it  
for the river on wings heavily-chevroned--

oystercatcher, rarity enough so I played  
a mild game of hockey on the way home,  
with my blackthorn stick  
helped a puck-size snapping turtle  
to the far side of the road it appeared headed for.

## STRIVERS' MOON

Insects are laying down their high tension trills  
this dogday evening, under a full moon  
riding a cloud stream, coin of that  
unattainable realm,  
and down here a squash blossom's  
trying to reflect it.

The beans are up their poles and above,  
aspiring moonward, wavering, trying for  
a handhold of air, and the thistles are working  
themselves into lavender frazzles  
to rise to this stellar occasion.

Year-in, year-out, they leave their failures  
behind them. Even this pine,  
which should have broken itself  
decades ago from leaning at that angle,  
has never entertained surrender.

Meanwhile, in the nether zones,  
borers, aphids, suckers, hornworms,

diptera and beetles patrol, trying  
to shut any aspirations down.

Go for it anyway, you gumweeds  
and sunflowers, you maypops and star  
cucumbers. Reach for that cosmic  
doubloon. Show those green weenies  
and hunchbacks of piety how it's done.

#### REVENANT

I was thinking about weed-whacking the path  
when something large dropped onto  
the tip of that dead tree thirty yards from  
the window. The usual red-tail?

There was no posse of jays or blackbirds. Then  
the barbed head that bursts the surface of bays  
registered, and the severe bill-hook,  
and only then the osprey's black and white.

It leaned and began tearing whatever was pinned  
in its feet, turned it so I could make out  
the silver of fish belly. From time to time it  
looked directly at me, plucking the flesh,

apparently not threatened by binoculars.  
"Fish Hawk," of course,  
no other nickname but its function.

Revenant from its chemical oblivion, fish gone,  
it cleaned and groomed itself. Was it so apparitional  
before DDT? They say a poultryman  
might mount a wagon wheel on a pole back then

so the fish hawk could construct its elaborate nest  
up there and drive off any chicken hawks,  
saving its young and the farmer's,  
which it had no taste for.

#### FORTUNE COOKIE

When I drew out the message it advised,  
To truly find yourself you should  
play hide and seek alone. I remembered  
sounds like the first few drops of rain  
that morning-- a yellowthroat  
tapping at the trapezoid windows,  
indignant in his domino mask, defending  
his nest in the maple against  
his own reflection, beating himself up  
with his wings. Years since a towhee  
used to do that, and at least  
this yellow flutterer didn't mark the glass  
with the towhee's script, an alphabet  
housing an augury passed on  
from some wanderers apparently  
gone extinct on the underbelly of Asia.

### THE BULLFROG OF MY SEVENTY-FIRST SUMMER

Forty-nine degrees and you were  
already here at the garden pool,  
a double-handful in your pickerel skin,  
as though at that rung of being  
there's a universal coverall.

I didn't see you when I raked out  
last year's leaves and piled them on  
the compost, then I did, there on the rim  
as if you knew I was about  
an improvement on your behalf.

Now I do. Even when I switch on  
the pump you are silent and unmoved,  
though there's panic among  
the water-striders, and even  
smaller things are in motion.

Your look is non-committal,  
an elderly pawnbroker's face,  
or pond-breaker's when  
with a glunk I hear you enter  
the water. Gerontion,

that's what I call you, because  
at night I have heard you saying over  
and over like the best-read  
frog ever, Gerontion, Gerontion.

### AN INCH OF ELECTRIC GREEN

for Ellen

It leapt in through a dashboard louver  
onto the passenger seat. Grasshopper,  
delicate as a dress accessory you might wear.

Did I own a neon windbreaker that color  
sixty years ago, could I have been  
that gauche? And if not, where  
had I seen that shade of green before?

Through the traffic of four or five towns  
and the skirting of three bays and a few coves,  
that virid bug kept taking me to memory's  
greener venues: the we-can-do-it  
of the garden's pumpkin leaves, for instance,

and among the leaps of recollection,  
how The North Sea forbids grasshoppers  
further passage than Hoy, tallest of the Orkneys.

And for no other reason I can fathom than  
the bug's range of motion, before its italic limbs  
finally sprung it out the open window  
I recalled that day going past the drive-in theatre

when we saw the man who'd had a stroke like yours,  
the one I held up as an example while he pushed  
along the sidewalk by the state road, struggling  
himself back toward a younger self.

But failed, apparently, since I'd seen him  
a few times later in a motorized wheelchair,  
a hankie-sized red flag wagging his presence  
in the breakdown lane. I kept that to myself,

and it was only yesterday I could tell you  
he was on his own two feet again at the drugstore,  
gray as we are, but almost dashing with  
his cane and belted leather coat.

## GETTING A GRIP

It will happen on the day I look down  
at blue and magenta leaves  
which are probably auto air fresheners  
thrown onto the roadside, or the day  
I take the long slide on a fatal  
slice of lime tossed among the kayaks  
racked like so many spiritual  
ventures. High summer,  
Mr. and Mrs. Eugenides in their  
red vacation-rental convertible,  
the whole town become an ego  
theme park, and I'll want to follow  
the fox's elegant footprints out across  
the sandy apron under the pine duff,  
and beg admission. But the foxprints

will be gone, and the fox,  
knowing enough to hole up  
and wait out this all too-human  
season, and I'll fill a pocket  
with sunflower seeds and take  
myself into the beechwoods  
that defend a pond of water lilies  
lit like white candles and scenting  
the heat with licorice. On the path  
I'll hold out both palms like  
a garden statue, thinking Brother  
Chickadee, Sister Chickadee, but

sounding like pish, pish, pish,  
until one from nowhere clamps  
a finger--the Franciscan moment--,  
taking its time, hunting judiciously  
for just the right seed, passing  
its grip down to me,  
a strength, a way of holding on.

## VOLUNTEERS

Having attained critical mass  
these scalloped pattypans  
are waiting for me by the door,  
and over there are runners  
strung with still other  
varieties of squash. Variously  
ribbed or warty, flattened  
like hubcaps, globed, green-striped

on ivory and vice-versa, they have  
strayed off on tendrils for  
the compass points while I was  
visiting down the hemisphere  
instead of hoeing and weeding.

If I count them now I will get  
a different census entirely  
tomorrow. Not one from a seed  
tucked into last May's rototilled bed,  
their vines have crawled from  
the business of forty-eight years'  
compost. Survivors of scoop, dump,  
toss and drop, they're escaping  
themselves by passing themselves on,  
free-range theologians with their  
faith in the risen dust.

#### LABOR DAY

And now our artisanal baker skims  
his black beret like a frisbee across  
the patisserie, and reverts to English major.  
His Inspector Clouseau accent drops away.  
Donning his Sox cap, he locks the door,  
sees so many spoked wheels turn  
in the salty air, then a motor and zodiac,  
then a couple of plastic kayaks that look  
like genetically-wrangled bananas.  
As he passes the Custom Design Center  
he knows it's over, it's back to the city  
where the sofas are never called  
ambience furnishings. These landscapers'  
trailers are wider than pickup beds  
and loaded with jet skis, a Harley,  
assorted surfboards, collapsed  
beach umbrellas. They move with others  
toward the sand dunes and bridge at  
fourteen m.p.h., as though in a pageant  
of ownership. Where is the Creative  
Director, he wonders, and the prospectus  
of restaurant profiles, the rich fabric of nightly  
festivals with coveted five-star ratings?

The year-rounders are getting their town  
and native language back. Everyone else is  
heading away from this place before  
it heads out to winter at sea. There will be  
no potlatch, no grand give-away  
of their things, and now he remembers  
the Joads in that movie, their vehicle  
wobbly with lashed-on needs, and thinks  
there is more than one kind of poverty.

#### QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL?

Where are the junebugs that hit  
the screens strumming on spring evenings  
years ago, and the brown creepers  
that went up and down pine trunks

disguised as bark in motion?

Gone, and the whippoorwills going,  
and the evening grosbeaks that used to  
arrive like a flock of wind-blown  
gas station pennants. The cod are  
going fast, and the quail,

but when I weed-whack the path to the pond  
in June, I still come upon blossoming  
foxgloves, still surprised at their bells  
shaped like the ear-pieces of wall phones  
seen only in old movies now.

From one spring to the next they are never  
where I expect them, as though they have  
powers. Science can explain it as the scatter  
of a few million seeds from each  
short-lived plant, and the requisite acidic soil.

Lady Slippers too are based on such needs,  
their rare sheep's-head-shape good for a month  
then gone, only to arrive elsewhere another year  
when underwritten by the appropriate fungus.

So much for June, but now it's September,  
and this morning I came over the hill to find  
a skinny fox staring me down from the road's  
yellow line, as though I were some temporary  
denizen nurture and nature can't explain.

## A TAUT STRING ACROSS THE PATH

between the marsh grass and the dunes,  
so I pulled it, though naturally  
even out here you tend to wonder  
about explosions these days.

Out on the marsh as I tugged  
a black-and-white  
skull-and-crossbones stood up--a kite  
with red and black streamers.

It climbed a little into the air so I saw  
I could fly it if I got it high enough  
to catch the breeze. And higher.

I had to get it right this time. Running  
across Ferry Street sixty-five years ago  
my first kite tore open like tissue before  
I even got it to the gate of Glendale Park.

This is the way things will go for you,  
a thought told me then, but here  
at the other end of my string, the dog  
dancing around for me to explain myself,

barking for me to tell him what it was,  
the skull-and-crossbones dancing  
up there too--if this is to be my banner, so be it.

## NEST

I found it near that corner where

some Septembers a skinny apple tree  
hangs fruit the size of stoplights,  
the nest itself a palmful,  
fallen intact, the bottom so thin  
I'd be thinking about  
the faith of scarlet tanagers  
had I looked up through it  
and counted four blue-green eggs  
mottled brown, and the nest itself  
like a round of serendipity  
aspiring to elegance,  
tan grasses and a touch of dander  
bound with darker rootlets  
and forbs, meaning any herbs  
that aren't grass or grasslike,  
another collective name for weeds  
like dogshade and rattlebox,  
the nest itself hinting toward  
the centrifugal, the way things go  
when a tree one morning spins  
its contents outward.

#### WHY I LIVE IN THE FOREST

As though I had walked into some  
avian display, it hung on in profile  
to the outside of the livingroom screen,  
hooked in and as still as its effigy,  
hoping perhaps to escape notice,  
if warblers can hope. Already  
betrayed by the white streak of  
exclamation below it, a stranger  
passing from the Maritimes  
to Central America, secretive,  
it was not a commonplace Pine Warbler  
who sings like a sewing machine,  
or a gaudy Yellow-rumped, but perhaps  
one of those whose fresh music  
can stop me in my tracks. Olive above  
and yellow as an asian pear below,

with an iffy white eye-ring, I found it  
in the genus Oporornis, between  
the MacGillivrays' and the Connecticut  
Warblers, not yet into its first winter,  
not yet crepe-faced to earn its name.  
As it turned I said Mourning Warbler,  
and looking head-on at me, it turned  
again and fled for cover into the oaks,  
saving me the recurrent heart-work of  
trying to muffle it into a towel, or cut it  
out of a fruit tree's netting, or scoop it  
from the cold belly of the woodstove.

#### FRAGMENTS

(Against September 11, 2001)

1.

He breezed past me on a bike so thin  
it looked bulletproof, another spandex  
superhero, I thought, until he came back  
slowly, sagging and loud, both hands  
on the grips, talking to nobody  
on this road given over to birdsong.  
Both towers? He was almost screaming now.  
Both? Another vacationer losing  
his mind at his leisure, until I saw  
the headphone clamped to his helmet.

2.

The smell of apples ambushes me  
and it's Corn Hill Road again, September,  
not the nowhere of my cluttered rage,  
the jags of former things  
jamming me up. Can a tree--  
all wooden pelvic scoops and spine-- sinking

among chokecherry and goldenrod  
into the marsh's ferment, a leaf-out  
flush with fruit, ever say again,  
If you would compose obituaries, think on  
the way my time keeps coming round?

POEM DESCENDING FROM A LINE OF PHILIP BOOTH'S

Come fall the clearnesses simplify.  
Out for sunrise this morning,  
I was stopped by a single crash,  
then silence in the still woods  
before the rushing of deer flight,  
one white scut briefly, then another  
crash. September air  
and the sounds amplify.  
Where the river goes  
under the road, a doe prinked across  
the asphalt, then leapt into the poplars  
and looked back over itself, all eyes  
and ears so I understood at last how deer  
and Guernseys can be in the same family.  
And it must be this air's  
igniting of memory that recalls how  
right about here one fall, trundling  
the ancient testudo of its shell  
like a Roman war machine,  
a resident snapping turtle  
crossed toward the mud of a deep sleep.  
Come winter, the complications come.  
There was that bear corpse  
at road's edge last February, a grizzly  
by its blond pelt, grimed and rimed,  
no steel wreckage near it, as if  
it had stumbled out from among  
the trees to die. A day of rain  
reduced it from ice to fact:  
trickles of sand and road oils.

## HOME IMPROVEMENT

The new owners seem to be adding a domed colonial blockhouse to one side of a Bernard Flores saltbox, up where that stump's breaking out of the hillside as though from prehistory.

There's even a new deck for cocktails, overbuilt beneath so there'll be no collapse and subsequent lawsuits. Just about everything's up there now, including what looks like a proscenium arch.

Old Bernard was understated, a fine hand with a blueprint and hammer. He would never have crossed Monticello with Elixachicken like that,

but damned if his signature work isn't flying out the door in flinders, and that mangle of root and branch, that stump

suggests the head of some  
twist-horned beast, a cave wall  
aurochs or something older,  
its tusks or teeth an early stab  
at natural selection.

Whose spirit mask,  
which of the deadly sins,  
might look like that?

#### A COOP ON THE DOGTOWN ROAD

There are days when I know  
if I could lay down crossties and rails  
all the way out the peninsula, I'd go, passing  
Taylorville and the Shag Rocks, then into  
memory to that reclaimed henhouse  
on the Dogtown road. Maybe in a time  
slower than now I might learn your patience,

Asberry, and not panic at my misplaced  
password list. Your coop might shine again  
with a fresh coat of sun-baked white, crow-shadow  
crossed, its door open on flawless October  
blue and gold, if it hasn't been supplanted  
by a summer home the size of Penn Station.

Without punching in any codes  
I'm over the threshold to see you lift  
a piece of the white cedar you chunked  
out of a swamp back of the cranberry bogs,  
fondling it in thick fingers, testing for balance.  
Light but densely grained, it will suffer  
harder usage than heftier stock. There are days  
when I want the smell of fresh shavings before  
they're fodder for the potbelly in the corner,  
and the faint chicken ambience  
of long ago, muted by paint cans shelved  
on the walls, and back-puffs from the stove itself.

What will it be today? You seem in no hurry.  
A Canada goose half-finished, a snipe  
or a whimbrel ready for the pouncing  
of a stiff paintbrush? Telltale, humility,  
meadow ox-eye--some of your birds  
were as locally named as flowers. I can still  
name them when I can't recall my Jetpack  
number, sleep number, Social Security.

One of those drawknives on the wall  
will round that cedar to a shape a jackknife  
can incise primary feathers in, and a fluted tail.  
You sit in a clutter of your own creation,  
untroubled by the disorder you've made. Under  
a corner's spiderworks, from a box that says  
Sun Ray Steel Wool, a mallard drake stares.

I'm a grown man now, not the little Skeezix  
who passed you wrenches when you lay under  
your bug-shaped Ford, home after World War II,  
but I don't need to know my blood type, license plate,  
VIN number on my car. I need something  
to lay my hands on, Asberry. Sanding, priming,  
blending. Maybe a rasp to take to the head  
before it's fitted, or to roughen the breast  
so the paint won't reflect water and sun, and spook

a flock. That's how we'll know this one's for  
a gunny bag instead of a dentist's foyer. Tell me  
whatever will help me lay hold of the day.

#### MASCOTS

Late, when the clock's numbers  
are a red blur, the screech owl  
woke me with its baleful  
rapid wailing, the bluest,  
blackest side of any music  
I've heard. I lay there wishing  
again for some charm I knew  
so I could roll out of bed  
and flip one shoe heel up,  
or turn my pants pockets  
inside out as if to show that owl  
there was nothing of mine  
it needed, and send it off  
through the dark. Even thinking of it  
as a shaggy college mascot  
with size twelve feet, the kind  
they sell in bookstores with  
the school's logo on its chest  
and eyes like gold saucers  
in its cat face is no help when  
it wants me to be its mascot,  
wants me to sit on the darkest  
shelf in its hollow tree somewhere.

#### SURE THINGS

On the day after All Souls I go  
to pay my taxes. The crow

is waiting on the town hall lawn,  
full of flap, shine, and sass,  
immune to grievances, withdrawing  
a line of sustenance from the soil.

I have already passed the graveyard,  
our plot by the fence where  
generations of teenagers will bounce  
empties off our stone. Nothing  
personal, just thinking to insult  
death that way. Taxes and death  
for sure, but Ben Franklin omitted  
the sooty crow, its smudge  
always first in the air  
after a hurricane.

Trying for a social life, I chat up  
the pretty town treasurer, but stick  
her pen in my shirt pocket when I fail,  
about as welcome as that smutty  
forager on the lawn, who taught me  
scavenging, and to take a fistful  
of complimentary peppermints  
against the time when I  
will have no time.

#### A STILL LIFE OF EGG ISLAND

And now you have walked into it  
and ruined everything--

this spiderwork  
strung across the road in the night

sticks to your face like thinnest  
strands of egg.

From that tree the spinner  
pushed off across air to this bush,

paying out of herself  
to entrap that blue something up the road,

that shape on the verge of arrival

where the yellow line dissolves

in fog. You're that blue thing and now  
fall can begin: a butterfly

will turn out to be a leaf  
drifting away; your footsteps on this road

prefigure the sound of leaves  
walking a tree's decline.

(stanza break)

Asters at road's edge  
turn up blue rays to spot you

in this minnowy light, this fog  
with its odor of old books, sermon

and shipwreck collections bearding  
the shelves in abandoned houses.

GETTING A LIFT

1.

Why, when the Gulf of Maine is warming faster  
than any other body of water on earth,  
do I think of Paris after the November 13 attack,  
that young couple I watched on TV  
crossing the dusk to each other  
in the distance beyond a reporter,  
their dark clothes turning them  
almost silhouettes, all but her white  
sneakers which, when he lifted her  
as she hugged him, became antic with joy?

2.

Already the cold-loving cod have gone  
way north, beyond the Maritimes,  
and the Kemp Ridley turtles are riding  
the Gulf Stream from their birth sands  
in Mexico all the way to a newly  
heating Stellwagen Bank, where a north wind  
stiffening into winter can drive them  
down this bay along with the belief  
they're headed south, until they find  
barrier beaches they can't negotiate.

3.

Weeks of exposure and hunger, drifting  
like loose buoys, stunned with cold,  
then fetching up on the low tides, stranded.  
But those lovers? Because he had lifted her,  
or because this stranger in raingear is  
struggling up the beach toward me with  
another lift: the nostrils and off-white belly  
and dangling forelegs under her arms?  
Carrying her difficult dog to her car? No,  
two dogs, one on the other, or rather  
two Kemp Ridley turtles  
as this volunteer closes on me, smiling.

## BLOW-INS

If you think it's Brigadoon out here on the coast after Labor Day, unreachable, or not worth waiting out the wind and rain, these displacements will do nothing for you: the ten cattle egrets

patrolling Boat Meadow Creek like spirits from the Barbados livestock grazings, for instance. You wouldn't notice what's blown north and south. Not down at the tail end of the outer Hebrides, on Mingulay, but here--

a northern lapwing. Common enough among the tumbled stones of a nineteenth century village, and the vestigial lazy beds where monks tended crops a thousand years ago,

but here this morning, driven out of the marshes by storm tides. Black and white, too small for an oystercatcher: lapwing, plover of Northern Europe, unwilling passenger of a November blow.

And who shall say we live in unimportant places when far from Pontchartrain a brown pelican crowns a wharf spile as though waiting for a sculptor of totem poles to work his way up the bole to it?

## COOKING WITH ELLEN

When we were young and you dressed  
for dinner parties, your entrance  
was like the opening of the Loretta  
Young Show.

Today I thought of that  
and how it dates me, as I went through  
your five-foot recipes shelf, looking  
for pumpkin pie directions to rescue

the golden pulp I scooped and froze  
last fall from the one its vine  
had plumped on the bottom step  
of the shed so I couldn't miss it.

Those stapled fundraiser cookbooks  
have aged as pathetically  
as my old poetry chapbooks.  
In time even the names of the cooks  
under the concoctions changed,  
even the recipes' names. Here's  
"Almost as Good as Robert Redford,"  
and "Cape Cod Turkey,"  
which requires salted fish.

Forget Rehschlegel and Kartoffelsalat,  
but I was the only one who could read your  
American handwriting on the loose scraps  
and pages stuffing your notebooks,  
and translate it for family  
to pass on after you'd gone.

Remember checking our secret spot  
by the jetty for scallops the storms wash up  
around Thanksgiving? Unlocking the oysters  
and freeing lobsters from their red armor,

almost fifty years of our Irish-Jewish paella,  
and how I'd set bricks under the table legs  
to raise it so your back wouldn't ache  
during the two weeks you made gift cookies

for our twin feast of lights?

A dozen bubble-wrapped packages of Kavel Koko  
and Linzer torts, rum balls, macaroons, filberts  
went to the P.O., and you'd deliver  
a plate to the grumpiest neighbor.

Even after your wheelchair, when we'd  
read instructions from two different recipes  
mistakenly to each other, we found  
we could save the results by pouring chocolate  
over them, calling them man-cave cookies.  
I was glad to take the heat for those. What  
a matched set, what a pair, we were.

SENTRY

Thistle, you look like another  
of evolution's jokes, impossible  
as a great blue heron seems  
impossible, though you both  
are brilliant survivors.

Still, mixed metaphor,  
it looks like someone  
hung you all over with  
shaving brushes nobody  
soft-handed could wield,

then loaded one of those  
salad shooters they  
used to hawk on TV  
and fired green sickles  
and scimitars at you,

until, sentry at my door,  
you look like a gallowglass  
loyal to no one but your own  
stickle-backed containment.

I dubbed you Captain Barfoot,  
though I know from long  
acquaintance that a change  
of air will turn you to a mentor  
(stanza break)

white and silken, proof  
that the pilgrim in us all  
must cede his spines  
and hackers to endure.

WART & CO.

Right after Christmas, off the beach,  
the windless bay calm as an ice rink,  
two black objects low on the waterline,  
the larger and longer trailing  
the smaller, casually afloat.

Not birds, not arching and wheeling  
as dolphins do, and not seals, who may pause  
and raise their heads to take a walker in,  
even stay parallel to the shore with him  
as if greetings might happen.

The weekly Coastal Reporter announced  
the arrival: the forty-four-year-old mother,  
Wart, named for her markings,  
with her calf of less than a month, her seventh,  
and the earliest right whale birth  
on record for this bay.

That morning there had been no breaching  
or slapping, only logging, resting calmly adrift,  
perhaps so she might coax  
her ungainly swimmer to nurse.

What are the chances, with a few hundred  
right whales left in the world? At the right place  
there is no such time as off-season, and when  
the experts rate you functionally  
extinct, remember old mamma Wart  
and her children, and go with instinct.