

THE SAINT AND THE CROWS

by

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I.

Cape Meares

There is a kind of self that wants
the sea, that moves like voice and breathes
within your skull till all is vague and dark.
The sun lies flat, revealing only surfaces:
dead leaves, dead cities, words like pebbled bone.
Then shadows fall so plain that nothing draws
your gaze or turns it, not even the grayscale coast
and bleak-washed headlands rising low
as borders in your dreams. And there's
a kind of light you only know by water:
the depths and clarities at once, spark-brushed,
long waves like ages' worth of Leonid reflections.
All full of strange permissions, light
that seabirds enter, curve of wing
pale kyrie that melts the wind beneath it.
Now waves like burning wings
now wings that ride their shadows
now shadows blazing up against the shore.
The wind and shadows one and lit by all.
You could be anyone, alive or dead, who wants
an elegy: all loss is general here, all brilliant
and visible, arriving now—as always—as praise.
By dusk, the living look of sundown light
awakes you. Your eyes bloodsweep the beaches.
The shadows gather secrets close.

After Reading *Azariah*

i.

Kayostla Beach. Another night, this blue clock primed
with lightning. I watch from my campsite

a lean old man take off his coat just down the shore
and spread it arms-out on the sand—a shadow
half-self he builds around

with silver driftwood, log by log, as though he means
to make himself a palace there by storm-break, a temple

or pyre.

ii.

A hundred years now since the Norwegian foundering,
each body's nudge and roll to shore. Still,
the breathless patronymics its survivors carved in rock—

two shivering sailors, clumsy with luck—
weigh upon the bones, grip the drowned by name

to their end and to the long work of the living:
hauling out, digging in.

iii.

The old man lights a fire in the mist, a glow
that surges, spreads as far and high as vapor, held in it.
We crouch apart beneath the ghosting flame,
each shadow to each.

I think of Azariah spared, having breathed the breath
of God—how long the taste would last,
keep spoiling all food he touched, and how he'd wear his life,
a coat too heavy for its season, through to the woof,

which would always smell of smoke, and outlast him,
become him, faithful, in strangers' words.

iv.

Did they ever make it home, the two sea-spat sailors, half
a world from harbor?

The water in their ears must have grown as hot as blood,
the sea's dark flesh, opened on rocks, hissing
and hissing closed, sealing them to the instant they were saved.

They carved their names here, beside the dead, then vanished—
leaving only the filled-in effort of this grave,
a few rain-rough letters.
Now their etched face, guarded with pine, is at home
at Kayostla.

v.

Tell me, Azariah, what it means,
that litter heaped for walls, your cookfire spark, this mild
discomfiting rain...

Old man, survivor, can you still taste the air?

How do we know the moment when we disappear?

Canticle

A world too sparse for any song,
even the dusk-red gull's raw crying after fish
or the whales' creaks and groans, which must be praise
of listening, at least—too dim for leaves,
for the seaweed wreathing shore rocks,
or even the slow, self-sculpting life of coral, in all
its frail and sunward branchings.

Deeper, still, than that.
The sea has its snow; the last flecks, nearly dissolved,
of the picked-over dead keep drifting down,
and there is no more to say of them, such calm.
But in the ocean trenches are glowing creatures
under pressures no skull could withstand—

Their light is their own, though dim; it is
sufficient for the darkness. Gape-jawed, they feed
on faint life; it is sufficient to endure.
Sufficient for a world, their bare black-walled abyss.
Sufficient for a world, the crush of atmospheres.
Because this.
And this. Are two beats of a single, luminescent
heart. Here, in the silence of the trenches, to live
is to give forth
over and over, something of the distant light above,
unknown below as God's full breath
in utterance of psalms.

Echolocation

Nights like these, I envy bats their glancing language,
their knowledge of the secret life
things carry on in darkness, when all become—
become themselves, I think, untouched by what
we make of them. How indifferently
you breathe, invisible, asleep.
You could be anyone now, you could be dust stirred
or a world. The afternoons we've spent
on talk of blood and medicines, doctors, side-effects,
and yet, each night, undress
as if for the first time. So I listen, still; but rarely,
fully, just as you believe in God, I praise
this blindness. Here nothing is assigned.
I can give you another name, another shape,
strength like a fragrance sweet through all wind—
and these as true as anything, for a while. Only,
when I finally fall asleep, the dark grows certain
in my dream, the stars mere nicks in window-glass.
Breathless, you rise, brush names and echoes
from your hair, then step outside, mistaking
silence for the summer.

Cape Blanco

*"Throw the emptiness in your arms
out into that air we breathe"*
--Rainer Maria Rilke

Windblown on the headland's tip, I face
the blue arc and rock garden of the drowned.
The lighthouse winks electric above me.
Long nights of its first-order Fresnel lens, the oil lamp
in prism, each keeper's stoic polishing—now past,
the black cliff's artless automatic flash
breaking on the sky. Even the waves shoal more softly;
the faultline blooms white. Breathes.

It's only evening. The tourists, world-weary, gaze out
through cameras, toss their emptiness like words
out over gust and wave, leave the cape too loose with shadows
the wind blows back. Only the beacon keeps
this point of dune-grass and scrub trees anchored
to the mainland. It might drift off...

The shadows say, there is no place
sure enough for disregard. This is our purpose,
that we slip like pressed, forgotten nights
from the annals of the tongue. That we revive old
doubts wherever we fall, on bleak ground or bleak sea.
You believe you write towards order. But you lie,
for your arms are empty.

And what if you do ignore the blind and blinding eye
of the lighthouse, Port Orford's sparkling leer to the north?
The dead, dark-crowned with barnacles, still hiss
with myth beneath the waves. Night turns to you
its old glass face you polish with attention
until drowned voices take on the false gleam of a vision,
resurrect a tending, rag-wrapped hand, so that
behind the clear shield, you huddle in faith
like fire to the memory of oil.

After Enoch

*"And there is nothing in heaven or on earth,
or in light or in darkness, or in Sheol or in the depth,
or in the place of darkness which is not judged."*

--Jubilees 5:14

Samyaza to Istahar

When I said to you: *I fell from a tree of cold light,*
a branch so high I could only have begun there,
You asked, *stranger*, why I trembled: *tonight*
the rain is warm. Clouds roiled like pale silt
Against Hermon, where I had first blinded my feet
with earth. All around, the stunned moths, rip-
Winged, dropped from migration to desert hills;
you plucked one, gray flower, from your black hair.
Being wise, you knew even then what my heat
clothed: that still secret heart, chill word of heaven.
You drew it like blood from my lip,
left *this*, as you were drawn up to the numbing grove.
Rainwashed, undusted, I am now mere weft
through which every unaimed shadow moves.

Istahar to Samyaza

Just as some of the sky's flax blue
blossomed field survives in the worn linen—
Just as mapmakers open the world,
an unknown animal, spreading and stretching its skin—
So you were prepared: to open yourself and to me
yield His name's raw shock and marrow.
I promised a night, and when your shadow's hold
fell upon me, my stunned arms dark with wings,
A little light still curled like a leaf in the cold
behind your gaze. I could hardly bear its taking
Until your word was mine. On earth, you knew,
all things are used, are forced to soften and to heed.
It is true. Looking down at you, I feel now
a little softness only. As of rain for a mouth.

Farewell Letter
Dosewallips State Park, Washington

Easy to dream, you would laugh to see me now,
still sleepless with my flashlit books, apocalypse
in my hands: a ringing in the stunned ear of Abraham,
a voice within the fires like the sound
of many waters, here where I am waiting for the light
to press river to canal, canal to the salt-thick
ocean currents; to loose gulls from the silence
of clam-beds, herons from still prickling shores.
A widening, like the sound of the sea
in violent motion. But I think of you sleeping, at peace
with the half-death of it, fearless, and of Abraham,
how he must have envied the sleepers, all
who heard nothing, saw nothing. Dreamless, without
revelation or voice, I am always turning back
to what I loved without thinking—wind frothing
in evergreens, clear beads of birdsong scattering at daybreak
through junipers' blue hail. And then I remember
that night in the Appalachians, under the heavy trestle
of a failed railroad, its hard black crust
and scent of creosote: and you, still blind-asleep,
as I reached over, lifted one eyelid, found your pupil trapped
beneath like a water-bird in closing ice.
I've kept my eyes wide to watch this dawn draw, deepen
like the last word of sleep, fire into water,
when the birds are freed in us.

Meditation at Hood Canal

Two weeks of rain. Clouds so low
 they reflect the channel's loose blue-black, rippling
 out, gathering imperfections, wings
 and calls. The seabirds still half in summer hue
 arise, break like storm-swell where the seals haul out
 and lie at home. Windburned, chilled white
 behind my camera's dead misted eye,

I think of the radio news this morning,
 old rumor bending light, blurring a single lens:
 a possible incarnation, three thousand miles to the east,
 of the ivory-billed woodpecker,
 long a ghost, extinct—*called*, the carried voice
 insists, *the Lord God Bird*. Cold
 in tourist's clothes, I remember those hot southern mires, pools
 like the peeled-off backing of moons—
 black gibbous, black full—
 and the hunger, percussive, of wild life
 for the dead, whose fibrous hollows teem

With afterlives. And how, in the Georgia steam
 forest after storms, mosquitoes hung light
 as black down on the air, or full, heavy
 with a heat whose breathing shape had passed
 as imperfection or echo in the fog...
 What ghost was it the thick air fed upon?
 What native hide and call? More than once, glancing
 back, I've seen my way home hung
 with the tiny garnet lanterns of its blood.

Kayostla Beach

*"In paradise I poised my foot above the boat and said:
Who prayed for me?"—James Wright*

When I woke at daybreak, there was a route lit
among the matted scents of beach-wrack,
mounded confessions of the sea. Round lanterns,
blue and green: glass floats from the nets
of fishing fleets off coasts I'd never seen, nor
am likely to. Storms or long wear stole them,
set them adrift for months, years. And by black
surges, the last storm breaking here, they were
delivered. Inside each globe, the breath
of a glass-blower, tang or smoke preserved.
How fully they took up the weak light no more
than a slickness underfoot, and with it recalled
their origin—molten spun worlds. I believe now
that is the closest I will come to being saved:
gathering the unfragile breaths of masters
in the half-dark, breathing back, out like this
over our shared and violent ocean.

II.

Meditation at Fontana
Variation on Brueghel's Dulle Griet

i.

If dreams come from within, tonight I am a chill heaven—
 black lakewater filling broken roofs, the drifting
 silt streets of Fontana. The fish that pulled my mind
 down into the ruins has vanished there, distant
 as the miners whose foundations pearl yearly to release
 a soundless storm of fingerlings.

The poem must have been in the sunlight, the way it split
 in water to become the fire of green onions at fencelines,
 the blue smoulder at the back of an icebox, the pink
 of work dulling on hands. And the fish with my eyes,
 slow in its armor, was the only ghost in the lines, hungry
 for color, plundering the little gleams. Now, past
 midnight, the water is empty—is the surface of water—
 and I am colder than words.

What is it the mind wants, always seeking out
 the dead, painting the long flare of their silence
 raw? They breathe in another likeness of their world, wilder
 than they were, brazen in their new, unending day.
 But we surface. We haul ourselves to shore and crouch there,
 shadows on the dim ergot of frost—not fully given over,
 not fully given up.

ii.

On nights like these, Meg, I envy you your Hell—
 the red land that lifts its shocking lids around you,
 so that whatever was calm once, hill and hollow and home,
 glares at you, alight with the golden eyes of all
 you ever thought you'd lost, all you ever buried. Caught
 at the moment loss took color, suspended in its oils,
 you are fierce in your war-gear and greed, unsatisfied

And undefeated. I wonder if the miners here, in the fresh dark
 of their years beneath the steam hoist and tipple, filling cars
 with dull ore mucked from the blast, ever thought of copper as shine,
 the Appalachians bright inside—ever felt an instant
 so violent in its light and opening that they could love the work
 that made it. Or perhaps there was only the thought of home, dust
 drifting down to settle in the cold washbasins where they drowned
 their faces, prepared for the long light of dreaming.

Twinflower
Linnaea Borealis

“A plant of Lapland, lowly, insignificant,
 disregarded, flowering but for a brief time”
 --Carolus Linnaeus

On pilgrimage to Lapland's icy flora, the botanist
 notes all, or means to: even the ancient rules
 of the war game called *tablut*, played by the peasants
 here, who are for him monumental
 in strangeness and loneliness and working memory.
 And the plants equal to them: *Andromeda*
 of swamp hummocks sketched beside a naked woman
 in his notebook, both with a certain shameless care
 for curve and line; perfumed *Angelica arcangelica*,
 medicine of Gabriel or the tea of Sámi shamans
 against plague. The pale pink scrutiny of the twinflower,
 craning its heads apart. Black days, white nights, life
 of the natives here, the game-players, magicians, women
 (*furies*, he writes) who tell him that the king begins
 in the center, conquers only by escape, bearing
 his name to the brink, which for him must
 be holy. He has arrived at the sheer cliff cold makes
 of latitude, gives their chill fjöll the honor of genus, species;
 their wives flowers; their flowers warmer myths
 and his close regard. Home again, he will parade for friends
 in the garb of a shaman, never speak of this night spent
 roaming with his guide, an unnamed woman—
 alien, isolate with old snows—who knows what he wants:
 to fear her. She leads him so far from any home
 he thinks the gray sky closer than voices, but he has
 learned to bear himself as a ghost does, the word *twinflower*
 finding its throne on his tongue.

Linnaeus at Uppsala

His circle like a flower clock: as soon as one face
 closed or faded, another opened up. He could measure
 time as he preferred, by the flourish or loss
 of their attentions. Morning, he was popular and genius.
 Evening, he was genius and not. In the far north,
 where the darkless summers bred their unbinomial
 spare crop—Eden of mosses, gray crusts—
 he had journeyed long enough that, home again, still
 his washwater smelled for weeks of reindeer skins,
 old smoke, boreal teas. Foreign things.
 Time there had moved elliptically; twilights, squeezed
 like the corners of an eye, shed cold instead
 of water. He was at all hours attended
 by the wordless indifference and disorder of the wind.
 Back at the university, he began his work on race—
 leaving, after *europeanus*, *africanus*, and the rest
 a place for rumored ape-men, alpine dwarves, and other
 aberrations, drawn inexorably, as northward once,
 to the distant and unassumed: *monstrosus*,
 darkling life, inexplicably remote and stirring
 as the silent, weightless heave of the aurora. Animal
 in thirst, he bent to his own dubious reflection,
 drank himself whole.

The Green Man Greet the Night

Bitter, the leaves of my breath.
A long time since I last spoke, and green life
palls in the wet dark, sinks back into that pit
of lurking gutturals.

My sleep was more stubborn than seeds.
Plain stone, I hoarded silence, wore gray moss
like the moon before storms. I swallowed
the leaves that rose up in me.

Where did those clear years go, that I lived
while I was sleeping? They were pure
as rain before smoke, as shadow in caves
before fire. Then a night

Supple with wind, with all the postures
of ink and being, drew me out of myself,
water from a narrow well, or an eye realizing
its openness. So I blame you for this tree—

You thirsty moon, rooted in dark thoughts.
You stars, spores of a brilliant fern
I would forget even silence to remember.

Return to Dell Pond

No sleep, and no stars.

Full moon so clear I can make out those Latin refugees—
Mare Tranquillitatis, Mare Serenitatis—dry gray, it's true,
but without seizures.

The wind like a broad-lipped fish bites
that white reflection on the pond, spits it back out.

A long black whisper slides through the gap
in the slate-topped garden dam. There, on the flat stone
that holds the sun's warmth late, the last of the turtles
slowly cool.

It's not a vigil they keep; they are more like
dreamers awaking, once more wholly of the flesh,
aware of bearing the weight of themselves, spines fused

to the hard arch of the future tense.

*

In this reflected light, my reflection is a second moon, a cast-off,
shadow-pocked asylum for abandoned things—

dead words, the names of minor deities,
riddles and protective charms.

The water in its brief, reproachful facehood
issues the usual complaint,

the *qui hic locus*

Eliot lifted from Seneca, and I hereby steal from both,
translate loosely: *what world is this?* or simply
what have I done?

The dead too much like us for hallowing.

*

In an L-shaped one-hall world, hospital ward, heavy
with the doctrines of body,

dwelled ghosts

who were not yet ghosts, and tired shepherds,
and laws against pencils and pens. There, thoughts

of Dell Pond grew strange to my mind. Every day equal
and abrupt, every morning that ritual blinding,
flashlight beam in the eyes

turning to powder

another leaf, petal, pebble
 in the ground-down, deep mortar
of memory. I wrote my elegy in colored wax.

No use in that. Read the alchemists: failures in every
house of heaven, or self-deceit. Base lead is lead, is never
golden, much less gold.

*

Freed, how many loops I walked around this darkness—
until the herons no longer fled from me.

Day and night alike, full moon lean moon, orangeries
of rising or setting suns. Now and then
too brotherly.
It was a dream, always, the sacred difference. The past
is present and unwise.

There are no ghosts, no holy places.
 Nothing but home.

Still, the turtles, gentle silent worlds,
bear themselves, if not with grace, at least without
 philosophy—each filling with flesh
the dreadful, patient chamber of a lyre.

The Green Man to *The Ruin* Poet, on Roman Bath

*“Wraetlic is ðes wealstan;
wyrde gebraecon burgstede burston,
brosnað enta geweorc.”--“The Ruin”*

What you composed, you heard with an ear attuned
to shadow, and all shadows lie, promise
 lost wealth at their heart. Your warriors
gleamed; your architects, ingenious, wrought high gates,
the red-tiled arches. The baths steamed with the wraith
of mirth you raised

 as answer to the dark: your age the ruin,
frost-gilt, of halls and leisure. But I was there, then,
centuries before you wrote of wonders.

There was less gold than you have it. Weaker drink,
laughter only as heart-felt as your own. And alone,
present always in corners, the shy half-civilized places,
I awaited the fall—

 restoration of mosses, creepers.
The men whose death and rot would be my welcome
I envied for their idle talk, their blind approach
to ghosthood.

 So I envy you the gold you could imagine,
uncertainty a gift long life denies: I must see all.

The shadows took as hearts the open gates, and whatever
passed through them—

 winds, words, scavengers—became the memory
of blood. I have passed through many
 unrushed, each century alike in ruin, rust,
nourished on the cold sweat of stones.

But there, in that town you later praised in shining errors,
even at the end, the healing springs were warm.
I soaked my resentments soft, dreamed myself mortal—

woke as living ashes, a flurry-weight of lichen
on the broken walls.

Linnaeus, Landing

Then the mouth of the grass was open to him:
he could never forget the heave and black
appetite of the sea off Gotland, the storm
clinging like a scent of salt to even the specimens
protected in marked coffers. Dead since culling,
they had woken at the storm, wind's scythe-whistle
over deck, through the shy prayers of his students,
sailors' prayers hand-tough with use. No one else
heard the leaves creak, insects whir alive as if
they meant to perish again, and with their harvesters,
as the men meant to drown with God inside
their throats. The ship survived, students and boxes
quieting back to sure life, death. But his homeland
afterward billowed beneath his feet: on the black
lips of a field impatient with the hunger of flowers,
his house held him chosen and marked.

Isabel Landing

Variation on Dürer's Knight, Death, and the Devil

Dark-rimmed, aggrieved, Isabel's eye glares blind
 upon the shipyard at Wanchese, crushes
 the sway-backed pony's fleer, its corrugated stall
 a wreck of furrows bleeding stormwater in the hush
 of gray light. A crabber peers for signs

In the tide: prow-names or a surging *yield*.
 He is grayer than the light and loves nothing less
 than what he worries over now: meat's brief brutish time
 as breath. He wears his occupation like helm and greave,
 his dog-wise shadow straining west.

Roanoke Island steps in memories of torrent,
 meagering or loss of spirits, *croatoan* gouged on broken palisades.
 This weather breeds its own harrows, the crabber's faith
 at home in hell. No wall defeats such wear or hides it long:
 the sand-bags' weight bears, then seeps the storm.

But as the painter gave the knight a narrow defile, a pass
 to heaven, and under him a horse with shining flanks,
 lifting the flutes and ovals of its legs; gave him a hound
 to bear devotion past the devil's naked face—so the sand-heavy
 waves, battering wind, give the islander familiars.

Breathe, O tired thrush-hoofed bay, O bayless hound.

Linnaeus, Unsleeping

Names fail. Silence pits the wild fields:
flower, leaf, and root all one in shadow waxing
gibbous, nearly full, lacking only the rigor
to hold his face in dream. He wakes, turns over,
hears the warm dark breathe and breathe close
beside him, how when he whispers the name
Sara, what remains—air, and faint shape in it—
could not have been left by *Anna*, *Marie* or any word
but hers; no more than the same clean scent
can rise from oat-grass in the wash of wind
as from cress pulled cool out of water.
She sleeps, still. He thinks of the restless nights
he endured as a child, the family linden holding
the whole house breathing in the shadow
of its arms. He could only become what it allowed,
pronounce himself as the tree was pronounced
against shades of twilight field and sky—
linnaeus, reaching. What is she dreaming, then,
this woman whose name has never bound
her to earth? She must be wilder than the grave
a flower digs in growing. Nothing can hold her.

The Ginseng Hunters

The earth does not speak to us. Once we believed
 as one believes in blood, its singing
 on nights when the whole world stands
 washed and empty—boundless, like that blue
 ridge church, blown by the Union half to hell,

Half to meadow. What *was* it we believed?
 The hill-crest turns the color of bones our hounds scrounge
 now and then from the mute
 rich iron clay that turns all else—
 sock-cuffs, rain, our poaching hands—
 red as a mouth.

It becomes us. We each bear a blood bell
 for a heart, and believed once that its tongue was ours,
 our fury kept in time. Resentment, then—
 one hundred fifty years, and what else holds
 against the terrible, clean breath of fields?

*

Sunwrenched, athirst, the dead lie
 wild for us—a glory of buckwheat, greenbriar's surge
 and crown. Blood fruit of the ginseng.

Only its roots are precious, honest and cold-fleshed,
 fixed in the damaged shapes of men.
 We hunt them, sink our hands into their mineral silhouettes,
 stumble home with our fathers' fathers
 mute in our fists.

If every ruin is a wound worked wide, open to God,
 and every wound a mouth, what tongue
 is ours by birth but this
 red-bitter growth? Wind-lush, the Appalachians sing
 the breadth of gaps and passes. We hear
 the stun behind the whistle's arc, feel forming around us

Those innumerable postures of silence
 with which men come to grips with the earth.

Linnaeus, Mourning
“Deus creavit; Linnaeus disposuit”

Mother to a closed throat, father to a cold tongue,
they sit in the room’s black moment and breathe,
watch the fire: sparkle of pine skin, fragrance
wraithing from cedar’s rubbled heart, then
the locust, muscle-bunched, burning last and hottest.
She thinks of the child suspended in world, dust
mote swimming at the center of her eye.
He thinks of a child perched in the twilight
of the linden. Later, as his students die one by one,
collecting fevers with foreign specimens, bright
martyrs to his *systema naturae*; and his colleague,
the botanist-physician, shoots himself
in a fit of loneliness, unsure of the difference
between devotion and enslavement to the garden
Linnaeus has made—he will remember the firelight,
the way their shadows branch, dispose themselves
to frictionless gestures against the glow-
stained faces of walls. He will remember and hear
the child saying in the language of ash and char
I was, saying gather them close.

The Green Man Carved On High

If I'm not careful when I blink, I open my eyes
on cathedral walls—stone eyes, wreathed in stone leaves.
Sometimes I weep leaves, too, each cheek bathed
in acanthus, until I'm nearly invisible, two eye-holes
in a hard forest of tears.

Are there souls bound to disquiet, as rivers are bound
to deepening? I think that the saints know, caught
in the black web of stained glass. At the moment
of wonder-working, their faces are calm and terrifying,
their bodies aflame with light, the flesh of each a reliquary
suddenly blazed open.

They stare at me as owls stare at distant rustlings
in the dark, keeping still without effort—while beneath us,
worshippers press together the dry rivers of their palms
and the clear steam of prayer rises slowly,
like blindness at morning.

But I think of the congregation most at night, when
the loose scaffold of the sermon falls again to the living
world. Sometimes I still hear a long, low creaking,
as if the pews have grown oar-locks, and the saints, extinguished,
finally moved to move, have slipped from their panes
and begun to row.

Where are we headed, in our great ship of holiness?
Where can we unload these centuries of space?
We know nothing, the saints and I, dead and alive
at once, more or less immortal. I marvel at the faithful,
at this other mystery—how, aspen-souled, these beings
file willingly to the high doors, step out unflinching
into the wind.

III.

Vision (i)

The world a raft of barley and wheat,
wind-wove, on which I float—
I and the crows—in a gold lather
of air and ready grain. All
else drowned: no kingdoms, no continent,
only this harvest adrift like ballast
pitched from a hurried ark. Last
of islands, hunger, to bear us
through the cold, dark, alone, alive,
the crows and I, inseparable in fasting.
Four days, four morsels,
sweet onion on the tongue, no crumbs
for birds, until all but want became sea,
this island all want.
Sun painted hours on my back;
my tongue performed its offices unbidden.
Thin, the crows fed on my verses.
Shore grass like combers bowed,
broke, bowed and broke and flooded
my eyes, so light striking the bare
field blurred, wavered into harvest.

First Parable of the Crows

But who could love it, this gray gall of waves
 and wind? So much flung matter, scalp of bleached
 seaweeds, driftwood bittered by rinse and heave,
 slow-hardening to stone. The jellyfish that beach

here lie like monumental tears dropped by an eye
 as vast as dreams of health and summer, time and heat,
 in roving home to deserts—ballast, the slight
 attention given this pale wheatless

soil. Of the prayers the hermit brings in lung
 the only one that suits our island is the chant
 he has composed against the shy, unsung
 wild likenesses that take this place as haunt.

The island's shifts, the wind's low surf and leaven
 upon gray grasses strain his solitude. He sees
 himself as land, a battered kingdom heaven
 loves strangely; flailed, he bears the salt of free

storms, and his back becomes a burning plain.
 Our flock attends his every recitation. Aged words
 like crabs' death-twitch ashore still gather us, unshamed,
 with promise—those the crumbs he throws us. Words.

We learned this much: a saint lives wan as wind
 or moonlight troubling seas, is always moved
 by hungers. So our cries are map to him,
 our haunt an ache too open not to love.

Cuthbert on the Farne (i)

First, perils of the eye—expected, yet formed
sometimes as much by the place as by one's own
desires. The sea and the wind lonely with birds;
also impressions in the sand, as though some hand
had traced with a stick the serpent motions of a thought,
an inspiration in love with its own flex and draw.
There are such traces here, with nothing
to make them; I thought at first, during a storm,
I saw a creature walking under the trees, it was the color
of rain in moonlight, it was only rain in moonlight
gathered like muscle by wind, and then let go.
Farewell, quick being. And the ear no wiser here, the scream
of the gale straining thin and human above me,
so that I felt the pained arch of a back across my roof.
My fire snapped black. Awful dark. I prayed and shivered
like a child, wore myself out, into dreaming.
I dreamed I had been bound to the island,
stretched like the wind from shore to shore, but still
alive, breathing out psalm after psalm until only
the one remained in memory, thin blank skin
of accumulated margins—dead silence, and I lay like that,
like silence: gut-feast to rain and birds.

Cuthbert on the Farne (ii)

Not even a hill, a rise too low for lees.
Still, I taste sometimes the oaths
of drowning sailors, sheer froth on wind
that sweeps in from the open sea.
Any land that lies beyond must be cold
beyond imagining, to send this far
indifferent gusts, waves tangling the gulls'
half-starved shrieks and cries. And from
the east, heathen breathings of barrow-grass
drift in on calmer nights, give this rise
the smug and tombish weight of a last,
unliturgical hour. The noise too much
for prayer or sleep, until one early morning
found me here beside a wind-warped tree,
cursing at three screaming crows.
Now they watch me silently, the scolded
scolding with tucked wings. Each night
I bear the black stars of their eyes,
tireless and close, as though I too looked down
upon a drowning roof as water rose
and wind made surf of another voice
I know by its numb insistence as my own.

Cuthbert on the Farne (iii)

Pale shares of moonlight opening the water.
 The hiss of wind in the miraculous wheat, froth
 field heaving leeward, the feet of the late walker
 sand-held and sure.

Aiden must have seen the sea like that,
 his saint's eye trained to summon harvests
 from salt. But this island, these waves
 refuse me. Sleepless, dizzy with fasts, I look out
 and all the night offers in its southing
 is an echo of past nights, the hush-washed feet
 of ghosts.

I think of the brother who followed me in secret
 once, back at Lindesfarne—his furtive zeal,
 more than his face, still haunts my mind—when habit
 drew me from my cell down to the shore. The air was
 dark, clear. His attention spread and reached
 like shallow water.

My practice there was not to pray but listen,
 sit on chill sand beneath the sky's hungry whorl of birds
 sleepless as I, too empty to rest. But that night
 I heard his footsteps measuring the path between
 the door and my devotions—so I walked into the sea.

Vanity. I stood there for hours, neck-deep,
 numb-tongued, mumbling some wild, unholy office,
 liturgy of half-anchored things—whatever
 remains when the sense of words is lost, drowned
 in the mouth's cold fallows.

The current caught my loose clothes,
 lifted me, poor effigy of Aiden and the others. All
 I saw was what lay behind me, that man hiding
 in scrub trees, composing a new tale
 of my perfect dedication.

Each daybreak now, I wake as blind as when I crawled
 out of the sea. There is no pain like thawing,
 coming home. I lay alone, prayed for one glimpse,
 one grain from the far field to hold. Nothing came of it—
 dark lingered like a faceless brother or ghost;
 my words had the flavor of ice and brine. I spat.
 I clutched my burning feet and cried.

Second Parable of the Crows

He prayed too much: his tongue grew bald
with venerable sugars. Other speech
left a bitter flavor, as though he had sucked
a well-worn coin. Furtively he spat
in corners and bushes.

Forgetting the window behind him,
the drop of leaves from branches beyond,
he took the shadows on the wall
for signs and beings. Silent messengers,
they drifted down; the low sky fell
without stars. Still, he spoke his few sweet
verses irreproachably. And when

We passed in flight behind his head
he felt us pass through it, some dark work
real to him as though completed—sin
wild-fledged and willed. How could we not
haunt his devotions? We drank in meager times
from the cold, miraculous spring,
that wind-lipped sky his want first drew

And made a trembling world of. Even now
thirst brings us to our genuflections.
Ghost trees shrug off our clutches; winter
sways the Farne. The last leaf falling
rises in reflection, grace, takes on
murderous form—

Vision (ii)

The world as sepulchre: how hard,
to lie still as night proceeds to land
the longships, innumerable, trailing
memories of ice adrift.

So many islands, more than any soul can bear,
pure white on blue, a cold that glares
at heaven with heaven's own blinding
idea of eyes. No man could lift
such sheer attention to the sky's harbor,
which is full by night, invaded by stars
like the distant torch-lights of devils
who keel ashore, and scatter.

On the shoulders of frightened men,
the saints are borne, incorrupt in their coffins,
sanctuary by sanctuary away from hell.

At each footstep, the weight of matter.

Through blind sky, a few birds, chaff
of the wind, pass as through a dying man's
dream of black grain flying from the scythe
or a child's first dream of falling.

Cuthbert on the Farne (iv)

Noon. Hackle of high beach grass not soothed
 but set, as last night's storm to hard light on the water.
 Visiting weather, too fair...

 The gray sea eases into black and white,
 petrel and cormorant. From the hermitage roof,
 I watch my native crows assemble in defense, the sky
 wing-ragged, pale.

A season now since my last courtesy,
 welcoming of souls, and all arrivals gleam and surge
 like invasions. Older, I'm protector of a secret
 thousand small pains, deliberate and other—
 vigils, ulcers, my raw feet blister and rot
 in boots I never unlace, but softened with lard
 through winter, the leather growing skin-supple
 as my skin wept away. But the birds drift

closer, become my brothers, black-backed,
 hooded, white of throat, riding little boats out
 from Lindesfarne.

 Their cargo is speech and grain, comfort
 and clean cloth, brought for my gracious refusal
 from shore to this driftwood cell, my smoky
 prayer-warren—

Eyes and eyes shining upon me, voices, hands, shadows
 of crows, men, too much breaking upon me, until
 all I see is the one face, soft-white, solemn
 and impossible still, as when

 he touched my shoulder on the ball-field,
 both of us children, I exulting over another small enemy
 I'd knocked to the mud, and he bearing word:
no play, no victories, you who are given to the mitre.

I am sitting in the grass now. The greetings, blessings
 are past; the holy messenger's round face is that of the novice
 who brings the full basin and kneels.

 He plucks the greasy knots that lace my boots, slowly
 eases skin from skin, then takes in hand each suffocated
 bloody arch and heel, submerges them in water so cold and clear
 I cannot feel pain—only watch, as gently, gently,

his fingers stroke away my winter's filth and triumph.

Cuthbert on the Farne (v)

Fever's chill cup, my skull.
Old visions pool and tremble in the bone-light
grip of my attention, so all past days,
prayers and fears—the ocean rising
up by night, taking this weary island whole
into the awful, pitchless freedom of its mouth—
become one, and sure:
I cannot be alone. I have the sight of crows now,
and nothing seems but is. A great hand closes, pulls
my skull full-fevered from its socket
holds it like a lantern to the night sky:
in hoc signo dripping star a story
light around which the sea pronounces itself
shadow blackening at shore.
Cold high hand, cold sea,
so little between but plain faces, life
as crows cry it, hoarse with want. The grass
seethes: I flare and reach as the voices
of drowned men do, when deep storms wake
their bones. What hand hasn't tried
to grip the sea?

Bede

Reviler of holy groves, the sacrificial slit
 and smoke, he woke us all with dreams that burned
 as portent on the air: angels bearing up the soul
 of another bishop, abbot, tough-fleshed hermit—

Some blameless man. There came a light, and music
 he couldn't sing for anyone, God's pitch too high and fierce.
 But others sang and jeered, heathens on the far bank
 of the Tyne, the day a sudden wind pressed and seared

those little boats his brothers guided, bearing hours' worth
 of gathered firewood—drove the hulls seaward, hard
 on water's sun-bright skin, far past the monastery's landing
 where he stood against songs, muttered prayers as wards.

The wind turned. That was long ago, the saved ones old
 now, and he alone in the smoky hermitage he floored
 with driftwood. We visit rarely, beg the stories
 we've heard of him before, the privilege of his high-tuned ear,

and wonder if our faces will ever haunt his dreams, stoke
 his prayers, or whether he can hear the song kept like sweet morsels
 under our tongues. The ancient oracles were virgin, touched
 by nightmare, select in their leaf-crowns and grottoes—

the space between their kind and our holy order scarcely
 a river's breadth, and clear to voices. He is farther from us
 than that, now. He prayed the boats to shore, saved flesh
 and bone, silenced the godless. So God sang him an island, a sea.

Notes

“Cape Blanco”: Epigraph from Rilke, Rainer Maria. “First Elegy.” trans. A. Poulin. *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

“After Enoch”: Epigraph as translated in Charles, R.H. “The Book of Jubilees.” *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.

“Kayostla Beach”: Epigraph from Wright, James. “Father.” *The Green Wall*. New York: AMS Press, 1957.

“Twinflower”: Epigraph from Linnaeus, Carolus. *Critica Botanica*. Leyden, 1737.

“Return to Dell Pond”: the *qui hic locus* is originally from Seneca’s *Hercules Furens*.

“The Green Man to *The Ruin* Poet, on Roman Bath”: Epigraph as edited by Klinck, Anne L. “The Ruin.” *The Old English Elegies*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992.

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