

Becoming Bird

Annie G. Rogers

www.anniegrogers.com

Emily, in her Room	4
Letters	5
Afterlife	6
Roar, Violin	7
Cartographer, Irrealis	8
About the Gates	9
God and the Carpet Reader	11
The Middle Days	12
Reading, One Green Day	13
Nuthatch	14
Invocation	15
Feathered Alphabet	16
Traces	17
During the Eclipse	19
Moths, In a Time of Pandemic	20

Future Imperfect	22
Once	23
Fox, A Riddle	24
Becoming Bird	26

Emily, In Her Room

Dusk envelops the room you turn

 a tiny circle a cloth tongue

sticks out you strike the light:

 grey floorboards a wall and sudden table waver

you turn a cold doorknob infinitesimally

 into its own tense orbit. The hinge

 Complains: voices far below.

You return the folded poem a scrap

 in your pocket you will not cross

the threshold this room makes

 a satisfying little orbit your life

hinged here with flickering lines. The hedge below

 is dense with bees lavender freighted music

clogged with Music you write.

Every word shines

Scribbles into which everything folds

the turn return the hinge the orbit.

Letters

From Lismore, Ireland

you post envelopes

of sound—

Notes, then

a cascade of music

bells from sheep, from the

Knockmealdowns

in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Desire forks

and re-sounds in me:

dark fire

blue-washed light.

Afterlife

Nora Ryan turns at the postbox, falls.

Wet leaves, an icy path—
What sound or shape floats out
from her body, its arms flailing
to the close gray sky, to the white wan stars,
falling ground to sky?

In the dark box her letter rests
its open circle C's, half-finished M's
(mistaken for N's). Who will read it
now who will read
its incompleteness?

At five a.m. the souls wait
in a scraggly line. She steps toward
the afterlife's border guard
weighing the souls;
it is any ordinary day.

Three swallows dip to the hedge;
their tails, sharp as scissors, cut
the blue horizon and morning
begins. Light
splits the felted sky.

Roar, Violin

I.

I was born a violin

Curling waist-ribs, scorched belly and back

Set down on a field of snow.

The sky is full of holes

from which light pours.

II.

Snow falls from the sky as a voice.

I pull my chair to the edge of a field.

III.

Alphabets: snow on corn stalk stubble

Writing pours over me—

The debris of erasures collects

At the bottom of the field.

IV.

Scattered over a dark corn field (stars)

Hung from a wall of stars (chair)

Movement of clouds on a chair (violin).

Roar, violin!

Cartographer, Irrealis

For Andre Acimen

You encircle space
draw, quarter, and divide it
cartographer of lost cities.
Fog envelopes your table
ink, paper, table all dissolve.

Once living spaces
gates, alleys, houses,
bridges, canals, lights,
dust motes, hallways, rooms
lost people, lost moments.

You enter the cities you've drawn:
each a memory, each your own
museum. Are you leaving again
or returning? The city circles -
an interior that exits, an exterior
that enters; you were there and
not there at the same time.

About the Gates

You started planning yours
twenty-four years in advance
of their appearance in Central Park
in New York City where I now stand:
the ghost of Rodin—surely you know me?

I worked on mine all my life
for a museum never built. I foresaw
your Gates in my childhood though.
Sleds rigged with spinnakers flew away
on the frozen lake. Wind took them
in a line of bright yellow squares
and then I couldn't see them. They
escaped, drawn to thin glass
fish swam in clear water as if
blue angels or voices
calling, calling.

Your gates were large shapes
that flew up in the black night and dispersed
themselves to the stars. Voices started far away,
then came in clear. When I awoke, there was only
the half-said, the half-heard, the muzzled
speaking of half-truths. What
is the fire you draw to? And when you made
your Gates what did you desire?

I no longer care for Gates. I dream
of going back to a woman, a woman sweeping a house,
the sound of her broom
weep,
weep, as the snow of the hours
falls over the city.

God and the Carpet Reader

God saw four blue plums roll onto the grass
blue orbs, laden with bees. The Carpet Reader ducked
under a dark doorway into a haven of carpets.

“I miss God’s light,” the Carpet Reader thought
just as God became a bright, insistent spot
on a red and yellow carpet, perhaps
a fold of a hand, a clove of garlic
the pit of an olive, or the place
in the body that flutters while we sleep.

The Carpet Reader read each carpet with care—
The ingenious negative, the flaw he could nearly comprehend
A green thread of vines, some intimation of an
Emperor— the impenetrable gilt of rooster’s
tail-feathers, custom made coffins, unreadable script.

God bathed in a delirious light, growing tan by hour
He turned heads in the street, touched things
and they become sacred relics instantly—
Rituals would be prescribed, proofs written.
Glittering metaphors would have us lie
awake inventing origins, enigmas.

God drank apple tea under a large fig tree
Bemused by the kerfuffle, the love of flaws.

The Middle Days

Of September

Soft, overcast,

While I stood

In deliberation:

There was something

Out of language

Something of the North

As far as I might go-

Shores and pines

Winter's island

Sloped with snow:

A blind posting

From just out

Of sight. How

Should we advance

Toward the

Seasons of

A future

Unimaginable?

Note: This poem is a misread sentence in a Henry James' story, *The Middle Years* (1893).

Reading, One Green Day

Dans l'avenue

Brown paper bags

Candles lit in them

Sac souill

Sand inside

Luminaries

Left on the verge

Madame Bovary

And my glasses

Quelque chose

The light closes

Une jour vert.

Plum's dusk

On the grass

Something like frost

Oh, the sentences flung out on the night earth under a roof of book covers

the shallow scalloped breath, the spine breaking.

Nuthatch

With crown of feathers

fine as fur dun, teabag-stained

you dance on pine branches

sleep as mated pairs in tree holes

rare tool-user among birds

leveraging bark under bark

gray against gray

tail feathers up: small flags.

You went down

in numbers fast we couldn't

say how many. Still - what song

would you sing for us?

what song, *for you?*

Note: The Brown-headed Nuthatch is listed among endangered birds by the Audubon Society (2021).

Invocation

Museum of Waxwings—

Muse, come see ‘em.

Chorus of whistles, earful of birds—

Come, you air fools!

The Cedar Waxwings arrived
this sleety February morning
their signature tailfeathers
dipped in yellow paint
jounced the crabapple tree
snatched what they could
and where they couldn’t
flew by
nabbing ice-wet berries—
little acrobats, flashes of dun and gold
off to higher tree tops
the bandits fled, well fed.

Feathered alphabet

The snow begins

it falls and no one can stop it

it covers the back fence and flings

itself outward, a lost thing—

erasing time and memory in a great silence.

A running figure

on the last scrap of day

a rope of footfalls writes the script

that doubles what the voice can say—

wind turns to smoke and threads.

Traces

[paint by numbers]

The work on the page begins a blizzard. You fill in all the spaces and once they are filled, the scene is weightless, lifted up by the wind.

To translate is to betray, to falsify. My paper-skate fountain pen loops over the black ice. I speak every syllable, look out at the birch trees at intervals, as if to mark some place on a compass of the visible against this drift in language.

What I translate or paint adds up to the invisible, the unaccounted for, a dimension falling too fast for pen, voice or brush.

[compass]

I know the vintage paint by numbers my sister wants for Christmas like the things we see in our sleep. The forms are simple, the colors muted, the sky blue grey.

A word is coming up on a metallic screen so slowly you can't imagine what it will be. It has been etch-a-sketched on her birth certificate. It has made a place for her odd longings inside her baby footprints.

In fist formation she presses her hand into the snow on the top of the mailbox. *Like this*, she says. One fist, then the other; each faces the other. She pokes a finger into the snow crust to make the toes, descending dots on top of each tiny foot. *The next person to mail a letter will think a baby stood there, barefoot in the snow*, she tells me.

And all the while the word I am looking for still has not written itself.

[blizzard]

Unimaginably bestial and too slippery for the fingers of day, the blizzard we dream opens into a room. The snow comes down and we are without compass. And in the deep woods the deer suspect (with the poets) that all we see or seem is here in this moment.

As the wind picks up, erasing all but a white whirling space without direction, we enter another room through its keyhole, a small dying.

A little taste of nothingness gathers in our mouths.

During the eclipse

a rumor of darkness at midday
sent the whole radiant hive
out to see
multiplying shadows
of themselves
on our back deck. The light

streams in my pin hole box
closed tight
a half-lit hall. Outside
the bees still
hum and buzz. The light

leaks around a dark circle
and crescents of sun
bitten bright
form little moons
lined up on either side, so like

those shining bees
that fling out
too many versions
of themselves.

Moths, in a Time of Pandemic

Wherever moths land

A surface becomes a dusted wing

Resembles a worn carpet moss and peaches

Its body a crude tunnel

One has come to rest on the rough ceiling

Its sugar-sprinkled wings stilled

Introduce any changes slowly

So as not to startle the moth

It is injurious to move them

No matter how gently

Like white peonies blooming by the porch

Moths give off a certain light

In the early hour cosmology

A large moth summonses

A smaller one

We know nothing of their multitudes-

Of wings washing the dark.

I do not know myself dreaming

And moths forget me as I sleep.

I put on my wings like a great coat

Soft, floating at night.

Folding myself toward sleep

Nothing suits me I am a suit of nothing.

Future Imperfect

I will have been here

caught up in something I could not foresee

as the visible contrails marking this blue immensity vanish

leaves fall zig zag shimmer

while the nameless stalks us and since we are not

at the beginning the margin

for error is miniscule. The child

I was at twelve can tell nothing as she

looks skywards nothing of the ghost-written

future to come. She will not have warned

the bees ravenous among the fallen apples

of the nameless ramifying thing

already here.

Once

The room was dark with clocks

We solved equations while they chimed

I was the pencil the wing bone the sky

I would collect honey in jars all day

Everyone tried to sell us something

They had hands like claws like an old song

Once we had antlers and eyebrows

We were knock kneed up on stilts

The sound of rain and cars passing

Not easy to take down and carry away

I was the violin the bee the swift utterance

Drowned out by the next thunderclap's clap

It is passing over, be still

Be an open structure like a ruin.

Fox, A Riddle

The fox watches a girl absorbed in a book at the edge of the woods
catches a glint in her eye as she looks up and sees him.

Is it true or not?

A statement in mathematics is true or false as it stands.

The fox draws close. The girl does not move. Her book
open on a tree stump.

The girl explains in a whisper: "It's calculus, Fox. About the paths
of objects in motion, curves, functions."

The fox considers a vole in motion and the arc of his jump
for his dinner. He does not need calculus.

"See," the girl says, "These are Greek letters, signs, logic,
it's a universal language."

The fox sees that her pencil traces shapes like
nothing he's ever seen. He saunters off into the deep woods.

He traces some strange shapes in the fallen leaves.
Later, the girl will find them. Her heart will leap in recognition.

Is it true or false? In mathematics there is no fulcrum "or"
no ambiguity, only negation.

A sentence is negated at the start of the sentence.

If a fox has no language, he cannot learn Greek or calculus.

What then of his tracks in the deep woods?

Becoming Bird

In the rhythms of distance and presence

A light comes back to me, like bees

Along rail-lines and station stops

Noise is not music, yet musical

A slow quaver over piano keys

Percussive with fists and elbows

Kept our interest, pinned us there

And clouds would otherwise

Float off, those careless

Errors we made when sad

A suitcase smells of heat and dust

Photograph, ghost thought, streetlight

Drawing in the reins of myself

Weary, I partition myself

Waiting for toast, I whistle

Pay no attention to me

What sways in light, a bird thought

Winding away from the boardwalk

I have time when I am walking there

There are cliffs like curtains hung

I am the lost thread unraveling lines

Sequence isn't progression, is music

Beach huts, piano roll paper, passing clouds

Birds do not need maps on their wings

Oh, to sip through a paper straw!

Childhood and the Mississippi floods

The way distances define the light

Your thoughts, the impenetrable near

If I step out of my body I might

Break into birdsong, rent the air.

Acknowledgements

(2024). "Moths, in a Time of Pandemic," Forthcoming. NY: Routledge.

(2016). "Traces," In Zea Mays Printmaking Portfolio, Limited 20th Anniversary Edition.

(2015). "Emily, in her Room," In *A Mighty Room: A collection of poems written in Emily Dickinson's bedroom*, (Ed), M. Medeiros. Amherst, MA: Emily Dickinson Museum.

(2009). "Feathered Alphabet," *Commonline*, Winter 2009, No. 103, Nominated for 2009 Pushcart Prize.

(2007). "About the Gates," In Josselson, R. & Lieblich, A. (Eds.) *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Books.