

## Decoys · Marianne Boruch

I THINK NOW it was the getting there that kept me going back, something one might dream against too many nights of not dreaming, cutting *mauka* on the Pali around 7 A.M., up the ancient Koolau Range, high enough for cloud forest, northeast toward Windward Oahu, southeast at Kailua, past Waimanolo, the blaze of sea always at my left. Still the islands surprised me every time, Rabbit Island and its smaller neighbor, the one I'd come for, Kaohikaipu, risen up in some prehistoric fire-storm, now idle, a flat thing broken off, seemingly forgotten a half mile out. Or I loved most my wheels on gravel, turning sharply into the lot at Sea Life Park early, before it opened, the plain details of my watch: showing my Hawaii Audubon badge, taking up my weapons and instruments—beach umbrella, binoculars, bird book, thermos of ice and sandwich, my old Purdue Women's Basketball cap. Then the walk to the office, working open the battered locker to find again the small necessities I shared with other volunteers—lawn chair and spotting scope, the data book I would add to, scribbling my observations every quarter hour, any live albatross among the decoys on Kaohikaipu, be they preening or sleeping or pacing about oddly, all signs that the birds might come back, might have a thought to nest there after centuries and thus be safe.

Really, it wasn't difficult week after week, nor was the climb to the site we were given at the park. Past dolphins performing their antics for no one that early, past the corny two masted schooner, I reached the edge, the last outcropping before the plunge to the highway where just beyond the ocean lay endlessly heaving and shining. An *overlook*. To look over and out to sea, to the island where I had promised to look. So I made camp for the morning in rain or in light, set my scope on the spidery tripod and pulled out from the distant sweep of beauty its strange and deliberate particulars, suddenly looming, up close. Certain rare moments, I could put my eye on an albatross eye, or perhaps I imagined that, one or two turned in my direction, those bodies landing awkwardly, walking the island curious about the decoys, stretching. And then they stood still.

They stood still, and if I first noticed them that moment, my troubles began. Harder to figure which might be which, live albatross simply at rest

or wooden decoy, the old story though I was neither hunter alert in my blind, nor bird lured down by its human-made double. I'd watch carefully for movement but some I came upon were sleeping; it would be many minutes before they stirred, their dream—if albatross drift through such things—taking them a long way, up to an hour's distance. It might seem easy enough to distinguish, the decoys larger, clearer in their markings, some whose pretense was obvious like those passionately paired in a ritualistic mating dance, beaks raised for mooing and clicking and rattling love calls, all neatly supplied by way of the solar-powered CD player set up nearby. But the occasional albatross stock still, oblivious or dozing, and the single decoys scattered about—these I studied, squinted at in such moments to know which was real and which was art.

Ancient question, enriching, no, plaguing us since the dim start of human life, the cave drawings at Ariege, or in the Dordogne for instance, showing a single figure with its antlered headdress to purposes we imagine dark with grievance and mystery. Past that we know straight dream is function, a first decoy to draw the beast out, enchant it into reach by its own faint recognition, whatever real creature in the undergrowth, vaguely aware—*this thing like me*, or close enough. Artifice, art itself then against the grim knock of hunger, anyone's urgent wish to survive the next season for the next. So we make brutal drama of the past, whirl backward then forward. So I watched those unlikely frozen figures on an island 2,000 miles from any continent, watched them exact their fabled deception to summon out of air the more unlikely albatross, odd and exotic birds who considered and came closer, this one time, not for death.

Too many contradictions, and ways to reconsider—the killing habit of decoy and lure for safety's sake, actual creatures against so many well-mannered fakes, life against art or from art or to art. Because I have trouble with these distinctions, I have trouble with poetry, wanting the real life behind its ordering but wanting still its zoom lens habit of enlarging certain moments of discovery or plain realization, freezing them as good painting does, good sculpture does. All art is a kind of exaggeration of course, itself and analogy both; there is, even in the smallest poem, this need to get bigger. It might be image or pace or a shift of diction; something *suggests, goes toward*.

The diagnostic feature, Roger Tory Peterson wrote in his preface to the 1939 edition of his *Field Guide to the Birds*, was, after all, merely “a simpli-

fication,” a “boiling down,” a matter of impression and pattern rather than anatomical differences and measurements. His illustrations overplaying such things would shock, then set a new course for ornithology. Certainly for decoy making, an art practiced since prehistory, it already was the obvious tactic, crucial to the art, wrote carver and collector Joel Barber about the same year. The point was to be “symbolic rather than naturalistic,” to aim for “a quiet, perfect buoy of species,” all things best understood at a distance. My own distance, as I focused on the decoys, gradually taught me to see their white bodies too white against the real ones. And their black wings, perfectly etched, everything about them more orderly and grander than the real albatross, wind and water-beaten creatures, bedraggled, relentless, as if the former, as lure, were simply a sea-weary vision of extravagance and romance—a Club Med of phoney albatross coupling, the CD’s taped calls booming about them. Finally though there comes a point in the drama when actual birds meet the pretend ones, some moment when the veil of enchantment lifts. To poems, sooner or later, one brings one’s real life.

Given: the complicated though undramatic commonplace of most days and weeks and years. What to do then with Whitman’s manic bravado, say, his very unquiet but “perfect buoy of species” in “Song of Myself,” all its dizzying versions of self by way of Cecil B. DeMille, its generalized, populous sweep of hard tableau: convicts and mothers, surgeons and stevedores, cellists, roofers, runaway slaves, brides, old husbands and new, flatboatmen, firemen, the “great Secretaries” to the President, prostitutes, suicides. He had reasons, of course, crazy for the grand overview. He lived in cities after all—New York, Philadelphia, Washington—walking them daily, keeping notes, his eye a camera’s eye, that new invention he thought so ingenious stopping the hand mid-air. It was mainly definition for him anyway—American Youth or American Motherhood, the American Soldier like no other, American Big Thing or Small Thing, Americans abstracted to all generosity and quick, the best of human impulse, no longer the old world, England or any other place, a curious enlargement of spirit the poet dreamt for his countrymen and for himself.

Not such an original notion, with the country so young, to tout and embellish on national grounds. It was Emerson’s too, and even Thoreau’s, though one’s grateful for a certain crankiness in *Walden*, an unexpected stay against excess. On and on goes the long odd solitude of Whitman’s crowded

plea in his poem, to be all and everyone, to unloose the doors from their jams, to hear every animal, every wind-blown bit of vegetation, all human cries as a god might hear the world were it possible even to imagine such omniscience. And still he can't get to the end of it, or in getting near the end—here is one of the final sections—he cannot stop though he perfectly, and brilliantly, stages a hesitation in which to think, and think again.

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know  
it is in me.

Wrenched and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes,  
I sleep—I sleep long.

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,  
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,  
To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes  
me.

Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines! I plead for my  
brother and sisters.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?  
It is not chaos or death—it is a form, union, plan—it is  
eternal life—it is Happiness.

It's the "Happiness" here that surprises and moves me, coming as it does after "eternal life," a trigger if there ever was one in that century for the conventional pieties to let go their tedious beleaguer. Instead, we get happiness as the great find, a thing beyond naming or formula, capitalized to put his surprise and gratitude beyond doubt; happiness delivered out of the vast goodness of the poem, its endurance and burst, its will to live for some eighty pages if we consider the first edition. Then I think of Whitman's usual method, and of the bird book again. A simplification, wrote Peterson, intent as he was on making hawks and warblers in broad strokes, accessible as cartoon to lure us into woods and into—paradoxically—accurate, indeed

for the first time widely possible, observation. But often I feel impatient with Whitman's rushed images in spite of their sometimes startling detail, impatient with their caricature, thinking 19th century America surely more than a medley of simultaneous stills, each figure caught in its definitive gesture of trade or gender, courage or longing, each an emblem, a bit of a decoy, to bring down—what? I'm no good at this, I think then, caught between the charm of his energy and his exhausting takes and retakes.

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I wasn't only *watching* decoys. When Sea Life Park opened those mornings, I became, unwittingly as dolphin or seal, one of the attractions myself, the place flooded with tourists, school groups both public and private, an occasional local person, usually with out-of-state house guests in tow. I wasn't as picturesque as a sea lion, or as good-natured. My one advantage—I spoke when spoken to. Between my quarter hour scans and data jottings, I was easy prey, merely reading or writing or mostly dreaming off somewhere, I forget exactly. School groups would stop, the teacher in command—I always knew who by her loud, earnest enunciation—leaning close to ask her predictable question. And I'd say exactly what, no, not whales but albatross whose nests were at risk on Oahu, liking as they did flat, barren places in the sun, like runways, not a happy choice given the air traffic on that island. Thus treeless Kaohikaipu—I'd let them take turns at the scope—and now decoys there, set out to draw down the albatross, to announce the place as a natal site. And always the teacher would turn to her bored and distracted charges. See children, she'd say. Here's a real scientist, doing real scientist things, writing in this little notebook—she'd grab and hoist it for all to notice. And I thought about my fate then, watching decoys on an island from an island, myself no less a decoy, a scientist decoy fooling kids pretending themselves to be interested while they mainly thought *when's lunch?* or *wheee, ten o'clock and we're not in math class*. But I liked the feel of it, I have to say, those moments I was species, *scientist*, my scientist things in hand—*island charts, data book, a pen with its black rain-proof ink that might, maybe, add one tiny half-bit to the tireless march toward understanding life on the planet*. True to my decoydom, I looked straight at her, nodding, and never admitted otherwise.

I'm not so clear about poetry though. Because I am one of those who

can't help, in the first half-second, naively thinking that the "I" in the poem must be the writer's, at least in the personal lyric, our predominant form for years now, this in spite of the fact that when talking about any piece, I refer, as is the custom these days, to "the speaker," a useful distancing agent, regardless. Like any art, poetry begins and ends a made thing, idle or urgent; it is separate from its creator. It is, it is, I tell myself and believe myself, profoundly sensing that curious truth each time I work toward a poem, and it finds me instead. Why, then, my nearly stricken feeling when once, early in the term, after a young woman's poem about a toddler's death—she, the "speaker's" toddler—was discussed in workshop, the author admitted nonchalantly to her consoling classmates—several of them older than she, with children themselves, thus personally touched by the poem's grief—that she had no child; it was all made up; don't worry, no one died at all.

The resulting disorientation, even rage in that room was palpable. I understood it well enough even as I thought, and said what I suspect is routinely said, that a poet has a right to explore anything, that the emotional connection to the subject matter, and thus her control of tone, was real if indeed the actual story of the story was not. Something made the piece work, if by work one may say it moved a roomful of people by its authenticity. The young, inexperienced writer nevertheless managed this authority, and thus their confusion and anger: they'd been had, they felt; their own sympathy for nothing, their classmate appropriating a thing about which she never had a clue.

It wasn't manipulation exactly, not at least as melodrama performs it, strong feeling out of nowhere we're expected, on cue, to share. The poet in fact had been relatively careful in her imagery to build a convincing crisis. I turn these things over in my mind and think—this would never bother a novelist. But poetry isn't fiction. For good or ill, our immediate assumptions about these two genres differ though dream can and does take the poem waywardly into regions past fact, and mere commentary *upon* or mere rendering of what happened almost always holds it back.

There are ways, of course, we use whole subjects remotely, metaphorically really, to work out whatever personal reordering is needed, angelic or demonic. Whitman, for one, whose longing in *Memoranda*, his notes on visits to Civil War hospitals, led him to write almost amorously of death embracing the young soldiers though he was never one to deny himself the

pleasure of plain speaking. Poets find themselves writing about gardens or weather or whatever ordinary thing because direct love is forbidden, or direct grief, or certain angers. Or not forbidden as much as unspeakable somehow as if blatantly giving words to a thing might bury it or cheapen it, at least change it. Thus the roundabout of some very bad poems, and some very good ones too, Plath's bee sequence for instance, which takes on divorce at its lowest real life ebb and nothing short of transformation at its highest. Only by squinting hard, through inference, does that first level even come clear. My student's link to tragedy was genuine enough though perhaps not the specific sorrow she spoke of.

Empathy, in whatever form, is one of the gifts, indeed ambitions of art, the great *other* out there no longer distant but *in here*, a point few would dismiss entirely. Meanwhile, there's probably a thin line between empathy and appropriation though it's likely impossible to make any fair, useable distinctions. Poem by poem it becomes a matter of tact and balance, itself rarely under logic or rule. In the name of poetic truth, all manner of liberties must be taken, so Aristotle himself first argued in his *Poetics*, drawing out differences between history and poetry, the former describing something that *was* against the latter's concern with what might, in its place, be possible. Which proves at least the question is old enough never to be answered, or endlessly answered. The lived moment or the imagined one. The lived moment *and* the imagined one. Still, it occurs to me that the highest praise I find myself giving a piece of writing, particularly one in first person, is to say simply: I forgot I was reading. Which is to say, I forgot this was art. My initial old-fashioned assumption that the poet *is* the speaker must be a hopeful part of this. We're witness, then, to a life lived. Good poems make one believe that, regardless of fact.

But certain poets quite obviously speak in voices not their own. This ventriloquist's impulse hardens to near genre with the so-called "persona poem," a valued form of the dramatic lyric. Randall Jarrell comes to mind with his flat, prose-like poems from a woman's point-of-view, a cross-dressing literary feat that seems curiously riskier now than when he wrote them in the 1950s and early '60s. They're uneven; some survive better than others the translation from his historical moment to ours, against the current notion of what is plausible when characterizing a thing so unfathomable as the other gender. The best of them, I think, is "The Lost Children" from his 1965 collection, his last, *The Lost World*, the speaker an older woman

thinking of her daughters, one living and one dead, who come back to her via photographs when her one remaining child, now grown, visits with her husband who “enjoys them / and makes fun” of the pictures. But to the mother, caught by the sudden reality of the past—and here’s Jarrell’s originality at work—it’s less a matter of wound than of astonishment to stare at the album, the girls with pet duck and tin lunch box, matching hats, sand castles. “I look at them,” the mother thinks, “and all the old sure knowledge / Floods over me . . .

I keep saying inside: “I did know those children.  
I braided those braids. I was driving the car  
The day that she stepped in the can of grease  
We were taking to the butcher for our ration points.  
I know those children. I know all about them.  
Where are they?”

I stare at her and try to see some sign  
Of the child she was. I can’t believe there isn’t any.  
I tell her foolishly, pointing to the picture,  
That I keep wondering where she is.  
She tells me, “Here I am.”

Yes, and the other  
Isn’t dead, but has everlasting life . . .

The girl from next door, the borrowed child,  
Said to me the other day, “You like children so much,  
Don’t you want to have some of your own?”  
I couldn’t believe that she could say it.  
I thought: “Surely you can look at me and see them.”

Lost children maybe, but here the mother is also quite alone; the living daughter, she feels, has “discarded” her, pain distanced early in the poem by second, third person shifts—“She argues with you, or ignores you / Or is kind to you. She who begged to follow you / Anywhere, just so long as it was you / . . . she makes few demands: you are grateful for the few. . . .” The slow but inevitable success of this piece might be more a matter of what Jarrell shared with its presumed speaker and the speaker’s child—his

growing up and away from his own mother, and later, step-parenthood, which he cherished—rather than what he couldn't share, though he carries off well what it's like to bear a child: "to know it before it's born; / to see at last it's a boy or a girl, and perfect / . . . to watch it / Nurse at your breast, till you almost know it / Better than you know yourself—better than it knows itself." It's Jarrell's genius not to strain or embellish what he hasn't lived himself.

Another piece in the same collection, "Next Day," is less convincing to me although much is remarkable about the poem, the quietly dramatic line breaks, for example, or its wonderful play of language that could only happen in a supermarket—"Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All, I take a box / And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens. . . ." The speaker of these lines is caught in similar dislocations of age and gender as the former speaker—children away, less and less to do. As before, the usual contexts of identity and success are unraveling, and at the center is a woman who is equally alone though here the catalyst is not a daughter but a stranger, the grocery boy carrying sacks to her car. And the emotional result is quite different.

When I was young and miserable and pretty  
And poor, I'd wish  
What all girls wish: to have a husband,  
A house and children. Now that I'm old, my wish  
Is womanish:  
That the boy putting groceries in my car

See me. It bewilders me he doesn't see me.  
For so many years  
I was good enough to eat: the world looked at me  
And its mouth watered. . . .

That this ordinary incident triggers a fevered meditation on love and power lost, on inevitable physical diminishment and death is, I suppose, credible. My unease with this piece comes perhaps not because grocery boys never warrant this torrent of doubt and self-hatred, nor certainly not because these fears among women are impossible. It's that the terms of discovery in the poem follow so predictably, the speaker so near to type,

embarrassingly close to a rather wistful male version of women as beings who see themselves only in the context of their relationship to men or to a beauty designed to attract them. Of course such a figure laments her failing powers as temptress. Of course she experiences the death of her friend not by mourning her but as precursor to her own eventual decay—"My friend's cold made-up face, granite among its flowers, / Her undressed, operated-on, dressed body / Were my face and body. . . ."

The problem is we know all things too soon; it's the decimal rounded out to its whole number; it's every woman if we buy cliché. And we must buy it in part because clichés are true—thus their power—as decoys are true. They approximate and render the species, which every poem must, to be universal. Thus the success as well as the risk of poetry with an obvious social or political context, by definition passing from singular to plural somewhere in its travels. And thus Eliot's dictum, the half of it that Williams so hated, that we tap into what-always-has-worked-before in poetry, its tradition—another kind of species—to make lasting work. But a good poem also gives us the individual against that, a particular human strangeness, thus its immediate life. There was a French thinker in natural history around 1750, George-Louis Buffon, who stoutly, to much ridicule, defended his organization against Linnaeus's more popular classification of all living things. "In fact only individuals exist in Nature," he insisted. "The more one multiplies sub-divisions among objects in Natural History, the closer one comes to reality." To Buffon, large grouping then—this species-making—was at best just a convenient coinage of the human mind. Convenient but inevitable perhaps. I remember how it was living in Asia in my late twenties, seen first, always, as the *Mei-kuo-jen*—the American—and anything else I was merely a distant quirky ornament to type, the disheartening experience of minorities everywhere.

At Sea Life Park in the duration of my watch, I saw tourist after tourist, American or Japanese, line up with their families, even grandma, against the shimmering blue-washed backdrop. They grinned for eternity briefly but long enough for the daughter or uncle at the tripod to set the timer and run to join the line. I was always hearing the camera's whirl, its blip blip and the emphatic final click. In that fierce light, some were squinting more than smiling. But I always longed for one of them to let loose an uncalculated face to break the staged pattern of family harmony or honeymoon bliss or the grimly happy this-is-costing-me-plenty look of so many

retired couples. I wished for mischief, a second frozen for the album that didn't follow the script. It amazes me I never saw it though each time, right after, I noticed something—everyone easier, the self-consciousness passed like the fear of a hurricane, real joking or annoyance again, regular breathing. Or I dreamt these small distinctions because I was sometimes idle, or the place too beautiful.

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And dream, what creature is that? The one that, frozen and fixed but nevertheless like pain or desire calls out to us from its island? Or is it that thing, in us or through us, which answers? Sometime in the 7th century, the first person who would write a lyric poem in English had a dream, was told in the dream—by man or angel, it isn't clear—to write that poem. The sleeper himself, Caedmon, had been unwilling, refusing just that evening to take his turn at the harp when the story-telling and singing began after dinner, feeling he had no talent for it, was stupid, had nothing to tell, let alone sing. Returning to the stable where he slept with the animals he cared for, he lay down and dreamt the wonderfully matter-of-fact conversation rendered by Bede in 731.

Caedmon, sing me something. Then he answered and said: I know not how to sing. I therefore from the beer-ship went out, departed, because I naught to sing know. Again he said (the one with him was speaking): But you shall sing to me. What shall I sing? Said he: Sing me about the creation. . . .

Once convinced, Caedmon did begin to sing, waking to recall every word about this *middangeard* or “middle-earth” of ours, heaven created *to hrofe*, “as roof,” that close. Or so he inventively describes in the only poem coming down to us. But Caedmon apparently never stopped making more words until his happy death, retelling in verse countless scriptural events, hymns of praise really, though nothing seems to match Bede's regard for Caedmon himself, or for the poet's astonishment to the end, that such things came through him.

I like the story too much, its forward momentum against the want and warfare of Caedmon's age, not a great deal in that time to be glad for. I like

the poet's self-effacement and his surprise that he suddenly understood these things, songs or poems, and how to make them with or without dreaming, a gift that extended, Bede wrote, to knowing the exact night he would die and how to manage it, a clear premonition in spite of apparent good health and his companions' disbelief. I forgive even the innocent pitch of Bede's telling, the romantic gloss that makes it a kind of dream about a dream so we find ourselves in some weird complexity of half-wild goodness. What part of Caedmon's story or his poem is myth and what part fact, *I can't know*, as my nephew said over and over before he started school and more grave than he would ever be again, answering the silly questions I put to him.

This is, of course, some of the pleasure good dreams offer us, this not knowing, even as it's half the dark in any nightmare. I like best the notion of our poetry beginning this way, reluctantly, and as a gift to someone who doubted that gift. First doubt, then curiosity takes over; then larger, something out of the great world, and stranger. This profound *otherness* in poems, down to their origin, might well be the element that makes them poems at all and not autobiography or merely therapy, a means to an end. But that intricate leap, more patience than leap perhaps—how to manage it?—getting past the bare facts of a life to call down genuine broad connection without too much of Peterson's "boiling down" or "simplification," without exaggeration, or perhaps just enough to signal those of us paused, as any reader is, at a distance.

So I am both quieted and watchful, thinking how the Irish poet Eavan Boland does it, say, in her poem "Anna Liffey" particularly, working half-hesitation against authority in a meditative sweep through concentric matters of self, family, nation. On the face of it is Caedmon's reluctance again, this time the speaker stopped alone to see herself merely—and eternally—as "a woman in a doorway," the phrase coming again and again, a deep recurrence of image that might appear in dream though at once its ordinary shine grounds and opens something naturally accounted for. Because there are maps to take us there, she presents their lovely large specifics—that the Liffey is a river named for a woman, that one sees black peat and ling heather, swans, herons, "the smudged air and bridges of Dublin" which the river itself runs through, its water a "shiftless and glittering / re-telling of a city." Past that yet always back to that, the place and the language containing it,

this movement is a kind of spell through her brief fragmented lines that carry us—where, into what?

There's personal history in the poem, children called home at dusk, a woman aging and the body knowing a new kind of longing, cold weather, rainy weather, a brick house, a porch light. Against that a city, and beyond, a country with its violent history and its myth—"Make of a nation what you will /" she writes, "Make of the past / What you can—" A relatively compact piece yet it moves symphonically through several sections, its themes woven and re woven until there is distance between speaker and what has been spoken of, where the poet can do the impossible and show herself credibly as woman, as "figure in a poem." Here is species then out of the vital personal presence behind it, a rather luminous moment of coherence even as we pass further into something less knowable, more chilling. Because, as Boland tells it, "In the end / It will not matter / That I am a woman. / The body is a source. Nothing more / . . . Consider rivers," she says,

They are always en route to  
Their own nothingness. From the first moment  
They are going home. And so  
When language cannot do it for us,  
Cannot make us know love will not diminish us,  
There are these phrases  
Of the ocean  
To console us.  
Particular and unafraid of their completion.  
In the end  
Everything that burdened and distinguished me  
Will be lost in this:  
I was a voice.

A voice, the poet says, awake now like Caedmon and yet completely unlike him, the world passing beyond love into the hard and endless form of things.

Which, in so much contemporary poetry, turns out to be the *tears* of things. Certainly a poem like Boland's with its elegiac pace and primal imagery hauntingly ties us to the history of not only place but of sorrow, an impulse in poetry from the first. When I knew I'd be watching albatross in

the months ahead, I searched the elephant folios in the library to find the first and probably last word on that species via Coleridge, his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which started out humbly enough, a brief verse-tale-to-be for a popular magazine based vaguely on the dream of a neighbor and written to fund a walking tour, both writing and walking a joint venture of Wordsworth and himself. But early on Wordsworth got bored, and Coleridge too passionate, the former dropping out and the poem no longer a quick scam but a monster only Coleridge could love. I wanted one of the 1870's editions with their giant Dore illustrations, thirty-eight woodcuts that Coleridge, dying some forty years earlier, never saw. I was in the deep shade of too many books, and opened the mammoth library copy to the stilled immediate violence of the poem: the companion ghost ship, manned by death herself stalking her prey; the infamous albatross at various moments, first above the frozen seas as luck itself boding a southern wind, next fed by the sorry crew to keep the good omen, then shot by the speaker of the tale out of sport or malice or both—the poet never says—the slip of arrow white against thousands of inked lines that make blackest night. Every page is such, cast by Dore past Coleridge into a darkness only the Victorians understood without self-consciousness, their genius for disaster inevitably linked to their genius for order. Several engravings show the poor albatross limp, nearly as large as the killer and hung around his neck but it was the lifeless bodies of the crew that stopped me, each face terrible, glassy-eyed, staring inward. There are those who can follow such a look, but I could not.

It was only “a poet’s reverie.” Or so Coleridge felt called upon to explain, adding these words as subtitle in all editions after its run in the first version of *Lyrical Ballads* co-authored with Wordsworth, though the phrase annoyed many, including Charles Lamb who thought it not redundant but an insincere disclaimer about a poem whose virtue lay less in what was imagined than in what was real. The imagined? “All the miraculous part of it” which Lamb disliked, or so he wrote in a letter to Wordsworth. That left the real—those “feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery.” Then going on to argue with the poet who wanted more detail in the mariner, a past life for him, all sorts of personal minutiae, Lamb underscored one of the poem’s psychological truths, that “such trials . . . overwhelm and bury all individuality or memory of what (a person) was.” How much of poetic transformation is simply forgetfulness until god knows what arrives,

a half stranger in that most intimate and certain of voices even as we write it down, or read what others wrote.

In fact, Coleridge was condemned to hear such a voice over and over as his speaker holds forth to anyone who will listen, the poor wedding guest, for instance, collared on his way to the festivities, held back by this horrible story in a moment which begins the story. The *anyone who will listen* includes us, I suppose, two centuries later, all part of the vast, even surreal splendor and hopelessness of the poem to go on and on, as art goes on. Still, the mariner is a survivor, unaccountably so, left to speak of the awful journey though he must walk the earth to do so, more abstract and powerful, less personal by the minute though more human, one of the eternal forms, the shape of something—pure spirit or idea—beyond the thing itself. That year in Hawaii, I often watched a real albatross standing next to a decoy, exactly as the wedding guest stood, as we might stand, at the start of the poem. The bird seemed puzzled, even frightened. In a few moments though, he relaxed, and began to preen this odd creature he recognized.

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