



Children Imitating Cormorants

Anthony Alessandrini

Children Imitating Cormorants



Yavanika Press

Children Imitating Cormorants

Cover photo: Phil Openshaw

First published in 2018 by Yavanika Press
Bangalore, India

Copyright © 2018 Anthony Alessandrini

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

for Tess and Mina

Acknowledgements

The poems in this collection have benefitted from readings and discussions with a series of wonderful poets and teachers. For their insight, inspiration, and support, I would like to thank Brenda Shaughnessy, Sharon Dolin, Nick Flynn, Sinan Antoon, Jodie Childers, Danica Colić, Maya Funaro, Alana Joblin, Caledonia Kearns, Rob MacDonald, and Sharon Zetter. The poet is, of course, solely responsible for the inevitable imperfections that remain.

“Village St. Paul” and “Maybe the Dead” were originally published in *Sixth Finch*.

“Possession Is Nine-Tenths” was originally published in *Podium*.

“Four Ways of Removing a Wall (A Field Manual)” was originally published in *Tin House*.

“Six Questions for History” was originally published in *Hanging Loose*.

The epigraph is taken from *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*, edited by Robert Hass (New York: Ecco, 1994).

*Children imitating cormorants
are even more wonderful
than cormorants.*

- Kobayashi Issa (transl. by Robert Hass)

Contents

Passed through a cemetery coming here	1
Village St. Paul.....	2
Possession Is Nine-Tenths	3
A Pen Name Meaning Cup of Tea.....	4
The Eye	5
Four Ways of Removing a Wall (A Field Manual)	6-11
Six Questions for History	12
After Issa	13
Each Year Poor Ghost.....	14-19
My Version.....	20-21
Maybe the Dead	22-23
Like a Bramble.....	24
Ghazal.....	25-26
Graphic	27-28
A Note on the Type.....	29

Children Imitating Cormorants

Passed through a cemetery coming here

but

that's not what this is about. Where
do you see yourself in ten years? Asleep
much of the time the occasional meal
the occasional thought the occasional train
the occasional rhyme. When you dream what's
hidden in that alphabet? Future imperfect
eyes look aslant inadvertent laughs flowers
that refuse still to name us. Tame
birds. What? I'm free associating again
don't shake your head at me I'm free
to associate with whomever I please
I'd speak of her hair but it's too much like
talking about love then we passed through that
cemetery every poem ends the same way.

Village St. Paul

says the sign
beneath which a girl
in a flowered dress
and new straw hat
passes with her father
linked by laughter

I don't want to go
to Village St. Paul
I want the idea of it
the flowers painted
the moment betrayed

the poem ends here

Possession Is Nine-Tenths

After Dušan Malík

May I call you? To ask so skillfully
it's this I crave from you my Enemy.
He phoned just to tell me there's nothing to divulge
and wrecked my courage with envy. Et voilà. We left,
all proud promises. We,

oddly less jealous. Nymph, do come in.
Why make a scene? I'll teach you to cry
typically, pining for the wine and the rocks.
My hopes have been prudently pre-determined
so I can savor each nuance of your à-la-mode rue.
The bartender rose to preach love to the city.
Stars shine each cathedral-like in brine.
Toppling is never quite like waltzing.
Paper tiger, I've got it bad for you. Hello, madam.
Do please tell my body

when you'll return.

A Pen Name Meaning Cup of Tea

What's your best theory of fire? It
burns. When you're not watching? Mostly.
Better stay out of the sun until
this thing passes. (Three cigarettes later)
How is it now? Better a bit but it still
hurts. I keep thinking of her hair curls
falling on her neck though she wore it up I
keep thinking of her eyes she's lined them
so dark today they were the color of green
honey. Your longest sentence yet. Yes
I had to come in here to write it all
down. You know? You'd better go
lie down for a while. Alone? Unless
you know a better theory of fire.

The Eye

After a photograph by Ara Güler

I have an idea we can make an alphabet
and call it torture. No one has to know.

She's carrying bread today her arms
are full but her face is sad. If the gun goes off

will she just drop it all? The letters I mean
just think of the "A": the pain of the back

arched like that, just like that, about to break.

Four Ways of Removing a Wall (A Field Manual)

1.

Just wait.

Let the weather
do its work.

Something
wants it down.

This works best

of course
with stone
but given time
never fails.

It's easy

(as lying)
they say.

You just
have to be
immortal.

2.

Visit the home of the CEO
of Boeing.

As you know
the contract

to build the new one
the Wall of the Americas

is theirs. They're
pros. They know

when you build
you leave a gap

until
the very end

then drop in
the final block

like a tooth
suddenly

in the night.
It's okay

let the CEO
know

that you know.
Let him know

we're here
on both sides

as in Bil'in
greeting each other

through whatever crack
remains

to let the light in.
Tell him

not to sleep
too soundly

that night.
Remind him

the birds
are all with us.

3.

If the first two tactics fail it's time for a different approach.

Dress up as a dollar bill and run back and forth across the boundary line

shouting "look at me, I'm capital flowing across all borders!"

Or dress up

as a giant carrot and then stand in front of the soldiers.

Keep demanding

to be considered as a valid alternative.

Or show up

every morning

at nine am on a pogo stick. Keep a good fifty feet away but let them see you

going up and down up and down up and down for hours at a time.

Warn them

that you're practicing.

Or simply dress in white and hand

over your passport.

Declare your allegiance to the republic of wind.

4.

Imagine yourself
passerby
now outside

the lying
outside.
Now just

concrete
violence.
Passerby

a policeman
steps forward.
No outside

only two
sides: this
is the lie

the wall
creates
the birds

refuse.
Step forward

passerby.

Your instructions
are clear.
Now hand

squeezes
hand:

 tonight
blow it up.

Tonight
dream it
down.

Six Questions for History

In times before the germ theory were nightmares very different?

Ibn Rushd gazes into a silver mirror, Cordoba, 1140. What is reflected back?

Which form of torture has historically been the most painful? The most popular?

The history of the Americas as told by the wolves: where does it begin and end?

Equiano's argument against slavery on the grounds of its unprofitability when compared to wage labor: Discuss.

Why is it that when we've needed you most you've run to hide inside a burning library?

After Issa

a golden shovel

If you can't make it new
at least make it yours. One year's
worth of longing all in one day —
that thread that connects everything
with everything. A walk outside is
recommended for melancholy in
many different societies. A blossom
will either flower fully or die. I
can't really tell you how to feel.
I expect the next day to be about
the same. Me? I feel about average.

Each Year Poor Ghost

a pecha kucha after Cy Twombly

[Fifty Days]

It came again.
Five years longer without you than with you.
Every year that number gets bigger.
I get closer to you.

[Achaean]

I'm dreaming about you again.
It's the one where you come to my room.
I'm lying in the bed you built.
You already a ghost.

[Ilians]

I'm getting older.
The questions get harder.
You speak less and less. Anyway
your voice always confused me.

[House]

She: How can you be so cold?

You mean you don't do anything that day?
No cemetery? No nothing?
Just let it pass by?

[In Battle]

You: a ghost with a message.
But your voice isn't clear. Telling me go, go away.
But from where to where?
Art thou there, truepenny?

[And Hector]

My sister: I always want to talk to you
but what can I say? What's the point calling you
saying hey
this is the day dad died?

[Shades]

I have your name.
The one that scares the Americans. Or makes them cry for
music.
I have your name yet you're not here?
Rest poor ghost.

[Shield]

And anyway where is there to go?
I got as far as Cairo. Then I realized
I was following you
or you were following me.

[The Fire that Consumes All before It]

I get closer to you. Made of you.
Accursed but you didn't know. A worthy pioneer.
Hic et ubique?
Every year a bit more.

[Fifty Days]

Come again old ghost.
We'll change our ground.
Soon enough I'll be your age.
Once there we'll take turns speaking.

[At Iliam]

I don't mean to interfere
with your solitude. So much different than mine.
Just that it was me
who shaved you that last time.

[Heroes]

I found your sword.
It was a souvenir. Damascus?
Rusted. Worthless.
Once you were the world to me.

[Heroes]

Not long before.
I didn't help you put up that fence. It fell on you
while you were working. That was my fault.
Your bruises my punishment.

[Priam]

When do we become our names?
The ending Americanized slightly. First name same.
Middle name different.
For identification purposes only.

[Ilians]

I started stealing your copies of *Playboy*.
My mother made you cancel your subscription.
That was my fault.
Your bruises my punishment.

[Shades]

There are no ghosts.
You're not coming back. The fence has splintered.
Someone else sleeps in the bed or it's gone.
I won't be young again.

[Eternal Night]

A tiny stone and I kept it.
You left so much shit behind. Boxes and boxes.
We had to force our mother
to throw away your underwear.

[Of Achilles]

I don't visit your grave.
I haven't for years. Who's there? The trees
still grow unfairly, so what?
Sometimes tiny flags without me.

[At Iliam]

I get closer to you. Backwards
like a crab. Once you were the world. Now I become you.
I got as far as Cairo.
You get further away.

[Fifty Days]

You won't come again.

I'll never be your age. My fault.

I'm cold.

Your turn to speak.

My Version

He was by her account
in the waiting room watching
I Dream of Jeannie 7:38pm
I'm told a cloudless cold
Monday In this version
he jumps up out of the hard chair
when the time arrives

Now

when I sleep sometimes in
what used to be my home
I take the sofa She
brings out two pillows
and a blanket There's
the slightest of shocks
when our fingers touch

He's my age now

He collects everything
Peruvian coins
Ghanaian masks
photos atop a camel
before the pyramids
knows the Moscow metro
speaks multiple languages
pays cash for everything

I

take long solitary walks

prefer silence in the morning
like waking up alone in unfamiliar
cities

father to nothing

In my version
the television plays
in an empty room.

He stands outside smoking
the night cloudless and cold
breathing on his hands.

Maybe the Dead

think everything's
hilarious

Maybe here's
what happens just after
that plank in reason
breaks: the build-up
much too long
like some grandfather's
joke but then bang comes
the punchline
and makes it good

I don't remember shit
from my childhood except
what I was told to do and
what I was ashamed of
having done

Now

I might be the boy
who brings one day
a gun to school
and that night
on the news
a map of the state

hometown in black letters
and a red target.

The dead
may find this funny.

After Larry Levis

Like a Bramble

I prefer longing myself he would say
and might have been believed were it not for the fox
that accompanied him everywhere
sometimes walking behind like a grown-back
tail but often at his side darting to catch his eye
with his own little glinters

The fox

is a solitary creature he would stress
to his students, trying his best to fill them
with longing for longing and other lessons:
the aesthetic is poise; the story
saves us momentarily from a world
of pop tarts eaten straight from the box; film
exists in time and must be respected as such
so unwrapping a food item (a pop tart) in
a dark theater is like pissing on a painting;
foxes are dreams

And year after year
the one who caught his eye turned into
a story and then into a dream
and as he dreamed the fox moved in the dark
watching him sleep silent and solitary
waiting for the rest to come.

Ghazal

I think of you when I see the ocean, each time.
I forget Newton's Third Law of Motion, each time.

I take trains even to places where I'm not going.
Why this needless locomotion, each time?

The days get shorter, and I get madder.
Dying leaves cue my usual implosion, each time.

No talent and so no sin: November morning.
Self-pity's the loveliest potion, each time.

I find myself drinking cider though I hate it.
I fall for the sales promotion, each time.

Those church bells I hear should mean nothing to me.
But something is set in motion, each time.

The Q train breaks into the sun, over the water.
My heart makes the same old commotion, each time.

I spent years trying to act like Cary Grant.
But my spiel gets more Eric Bogosian, each time.

If I'm not talking to God, to whom am I speaking?
The same superstitious notion, each time.

You know me, love. I try to play cool. I play dumb.
I'm stuck with this sense of devotion, each time.

So-called Saint Anthony, lover of the lost cause?
That's me too; I second that emotion, each time.

Graphic

Astonishingly original was how he heard it
I would do anything for you had been the first
line after that it grew

stranger. He passed by holding a knife. He came
he said only to help and after her hair was
sliced clean through

he said he was done. The look of desperation
when a man loses his house to a wall the look when
a child loses his brother

to a nation. Here go some lines written to
the wind here goes the painting lesson the closed
blinds the dog's voice

the language class. Here goes the newspaper
purchased in another country (I misunderstood) here
goes the latest song

that isn't about you again. It's so hard to change
your life. Here goes the piece I wrote for money
and here goes the dollar

taped to the wall to guide the traveler home.
The phone call came. The cat ran when it rang.

It wasn't you again.

The girl wore a tan hat a size too big. The teacher talked when he should have listened. The students rose up but to no avail.

You looked at me as the fire began you were calm but the next second you were gone. The letter came too late to help.

If only there was time to ask for you again.
If only there were more chances so here it goes
the portrait of her:

alphabets for her eyes.

A Note on the Type

With its strong, simple lines, Plantin
is a no-nonsense face of exceptional

legibility. What remains to be said?
My fingers move across the page to feel

if I can find the face of the words. Words
of the face: we've had more than enough

of these. This bears the name of the great
Christopher Plantin, but the design descends

from Garamond. Sometimes I want to break
your hands, she said, but then I remember

you look sexy when you type. But this
I write by hand, in the back of the book.

One car down a boy and a girl declare
their love, faces flashing like guns.

I wait for the image without form to come.



Anthony Alessandrini is Professor of English at Kingsborough Community College and of Middle Eastern Studies at The CUNY Graduate Center, and is also on the faculty of the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. His poetry has appeared in *Hanging Loose*, *MARY Magazine*, *Podium*, *Sixth Finch*, *Splash of Red*, and *Tin House*. He is also the author of *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics: Finding Something Different*, and is currently writing a book on the role of criticism in the age of Trumpism. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Anthony Alessandrini's *Children Imitating Cormorants* is a collection that is imbued with a strong sense of Japanese aesthetics, as is apparent from the title. A long-time student of haiku, the work of Issa has always resonated with Alessandrini. Issa is unquestionably one of the main influences on the poems in this chapbook. The poet aims to bring forth the Japanese master's rare combination of sardonic wit and irony with genuine, deeply felt emotion. Alessandrini explores the relationship between the artificiality of form, on the one hand, and the earnestness and unguardedness of real emotions, on the other — and what happens when one combines the two.



Yavanika Press