



A CHARITY OF BLUE

Robert J. Wilson

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To Erica, Sarah, and Matthew, with thanks.

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Red-winged Blackbirds

I.

They return to the sparrows and rooks
they left starving in the bull thistles,
nest in the cattails lining the retention pond.
And with the same three words
 conk-la-ree
 conk-la-ree
red-winged blackbirds surrender their position
while warning the world away.

II.

Stiff-jawed birds who try to scream
but are made for music,
they flash tiny red and yellow sea flags
beneath their wings, asking for too much,
asking for too little, signaling error.

III.

At any given moment on any given day
they're left to find what they can and cannot live without,
their 1000 mile journey ending 100 feet away.

Both speech and silence transgress.
I never hear them leave each fall.
I only hear them return each spring.

Woolly Bears

They pass for someone much older
carrying their soft caskets on their backs,
moving carefully so as not to miss
what they lost before: Tiger Wings
the consistency of whispers.

Children, unaccompanied, they trace
each letter with one finger,
sound out each word:
Animalia, insecta, taxon,
family.

Woolly bears leave a third life
on the promise of a fourth.
They exchange their spiracles,
their setae, for a paper womb.
They believe in healing at a distance,
that one day a body synonym
will quietly take their place.

Wild Turkeys

They cross the culvert
where their worn gray cassocks
appear black under the pines.
By mid-day first one,
then another, lift their hems,
steps into the clearing next to the pond.

The poor have always gathered
close to public waters.
Wild turkeys lean forward,
forage their shadows,
the scraps of the sun.
The impoverished can't win
the rich man's war.
When we're out of choices
all we can do is choose.

Chicory

Thin green bones inside
thin green stems,
tender hearts,
one beat per bloom,
one bloom each day.
Their crooked fingers
feel their way
along gravel road beds,
vacant lots,
unencumbered by undue
fear or kindness.
Bitter roots, empty eyes,
metastasizing perennially
June through frost,
pathways of the earth
overgrown in such a charity
of blue.

Robin

A nest wedged between the lower limbs
of a Chinese maple,
a kind of fruit well within my reach.
Inside the red shade, penny eggs,
pale turquoise, the same color
as that picture from space
of the one remaining earth.

I move a safe distance away,
count my breath backwards from three,
and a robin appears, sits cross-kneed
inside her mud and grass porch.
I watch the evening light pass through
her body, her dull orange chest
the color of regret.

Stone Fruit

Lychees, nectarines,
their seeds the size of tracheas,
live in adjoining rooms
to their flesh.

We can't help but feel the soft spots
just beneath their peach, red,
or sometimes green skin,
the pulse from their two day old hearts
feels stronger as ours fades away.

And we were doing so well.
We talked, we bit around
what is dangerous not knowing
what is inedible until the taste of bruise
was in our mouths.

Coots

*In this attacking behavior, the parents are said to “tousle” their young.
This can result in the death of the chick.*

They gather with the bufflehead on Crooked Lake
in early March when the ice has gone out
but the cold hides in the water like a child
who thinks if her eyes are closed she can't be found.

Menominee call them *kib kib*, small black birds
that return each year to nest in outcroppings of gray,
stiff reeds along these same waters,
places I've never left or will ever leave.

They, like me, are guilty of repetitive compulsion.
We pray for different outcomes
to the same annual conversations
while still staying closest to those who

inflict unspeakable harm to one another
before we walk or fly or swim away pretending
we won't be back next spring when we know
perfectly well we will.

Eagle

That time of day we end up
standing in a very old place,
misaligned, staring at umbras, penumbras,
plumage in the eastern sky.

A vulture's wings, swan's mask,
passing between us and the
third phase of the sun,
it could have been an eagle
or just the way we breathe in,
look up, breathe out,
the light shifting, the angles
going bad.

We always believe what's closest
to our beliefs, guess at shapes
crowding the ceiling of our troposphere.
We trust everything but what we say,
everyone but who we are.

Cicadas

There, at the top of the catalpas,
they're like everyone else who screams
about their life and never gets over it.
Their ears look like eyes,
wings, the shapes of feathers,
their emerald sidewalls are misplaced
since beauty deters destruction.
Cicadas disappear underground
for years at a time, starving out
the competition, including their families.
The ability to betray everyone we've ever known,
however briefly, is baked inside our bodies.
All we need is an opportunity, a plight,
and someone to love.

Red Sea Crossing

I.

The chosen walk across
the drowning fields
between the signs of rain:
a cool east wind,
the scent of lavender,
thirst.

They are as certain
of their god as they are
of the taste of ice.
Just because they haven't
felt cold doesn't mean
it isn't true.

II.

Drowning doesn't look
like drowning.
People balance low
in the water,
show no signs of distress.
But they make no progress
back to shore,
hold their breath

as if keeping secrets.
The rescue chains leading
from the desert
into the Red Sea
fold their arms, disassemble.
You can never get there
soon enough to help.
The best way to find out
if someone loves you
is to ask.

Lamentations

We could have taken one long day,
one short day, the Chicago skyway
to exit 27 toward Cedar Rapids, followed
Sioux County highways to Red Cloud Avenue.

We could have walked to Grace Hill Cemetery
on our way to the graveside service,
read and reread the memorial program
while Pastor Sunny Dominic recited Lamentations.
We could have circled part of the earth.
We could have pretended to pray.

But because you kept your mother's death
a secret from me, we never drove
past Lodi, Wisconsin, or through McNally, Iowa,
never talked along the way about your namesake,
or brought up your Viking gene.
We missed the journey of farewell, forever,
never shared the right moment of time.
The miles we don't make one day,
can never be made up the next.

Winter Solstice, Cape Haze, Florida

The tide crawls to shore,
sand washes away sand.
Relief maps of the Gulf
show we are nothing
above sea level,
and the sea level is rising.

Today, the sun stands still
over Cape Haze.
We've gained a dozen steps of darkness
since last week.
You show me the pink ribbon tattoo
on your wedding finger
that reminds you of your children.
I hold your hand and you tell me
pressure isn't the same as touch.

Everything that happens, happens west of here:
the pull of the moon,
the gathering of storms,
slash pine driftwood
growing in the hummocks,
growing along the streams.

Hérons

Hérons sit in their high-backed chairs
formal and stiff as casket bearers.
They have a taste for movement
all along the waterways,
seem to walk on their knees
rather than their feet,
nod their heads now and again
side-stepping refraction.
I've seen them call off their mid-day search
for frogs, blue gill, mussels
while the deals still have breath,
follow crew instructions,
pull on their flight skin.
I wonder if I'll ever see one again;
they look so much like dinosaurs
disappearing over the ridge.
I'm sorry for whatever happened to them
earlier this morning: the failing light
on this side of the solstice,
the death of a child,
the state of the earth on which we live.



Robert J. Wilson, a retired high school and college teacher, mentors teens and leads movement and breathwork classes for older adults. His poems have most recently appeared in the *Lily Poetry Review*, the *Pinyon Review*, and *Snapdragon: A Journal of Art and Healing*.

“I find myself holding my breath so as not to disrupt the hushed holy in Robert J. Wilson’s poems. They are tightly woven around the natural world, exposing us to our longing, to our grief, to the most human parts of ourselves. This collection blooms mighty, brings heavy observation—each poem conjures up an Amen. I could have kept reading these over and over all day long. Kudos to an amazing collection that breaks me apart.”

—Erica Anderson-Senter