



fatal Birds of the Soul

A POEM CYCLE

by

BRETT RUTHERFORD

ایزدگرمک بقضه قدرت اوست

دادیت ترا و پسرکان مردوست



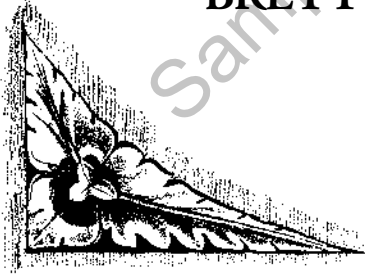
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BRETT RUTHERFORD



THE POET'S PRESS
Pittsburgh, PA

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This is the 286th publication of
THE POET'S PRESS
2209 Murray Avenue #3
Pittsburgh PA 15217-2338
www.poetspress.org

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Sample Pages Only



FATAL BIRDS
OF THE SOUL

AN EXPERIMENT
AFTER RILKE'S
DUINO ELEGIES

I & 2

*From Those Already Gone,
For Those to Come.*

Sample Pages Only

ENVOI

Night. *Night*. Spring sleeps on ice below,
within the vaulted limestone corridors,
awaiting a birth. The Poet hesitates
to summon an equinoctial tempest,
for soon enough the seeds and homing birds
will make their own way back, unhelped.
He calls instead on Night to season him:
Night with its trembling hopes is his;

not Spring, whose promises are often false
(the open seed is never what the flowers
prophesied); not Summer, when green
and sun grow fat in gluttony of light;
not Fall, whose frost reaps only solitudes;
not even this Winter is really his.
(The glittering ice-eyed avenue cracks
at the edge of a thaw, more pastry-faced
than glacial). To Night alone,
the waxing-waning-equipoised base
of the spun year, he takes his oath.



Night. *Night!* Wherever his shadow falls,
its kingdom precedes him;
wherever his pen dyes paper black,
Night reaches up to etch itself.

Sample Pages Only

YET ANGELS STALK



AMP-LIT, air in a tremolo
of antique
instruments, he incubates
the moment,
the blast of elegance
that renders vowels
oversize, enlarging thought and form.

Who, if he cried, would hear among
the order of Angels? Which one among their
multitudes would answer him? (One,
he would guess, whose amplitude
he had already loved in resemblances!)

Love at first sight — what is it
but the eye-dart of the un-met Angel?

And what if one of these beings
should suddenly arrive and press
its form and frame against his heart?
His breath would stop. He'd fade into
the strength of its starker essence,
blinded and numbed by possibilities.

All those he ever thought he knew
enough to love them, are swept away,
in the light-blast of a single sentence.

There is no God, yet Angels stride
the emptiness of stars. He apprehends
that Beauty, angel-possessed
 abstractedness,
is but a clue to that deep nullity;
for Beauty is nothing but tentative Terror
he's still just able to bear. Why he adores
it so is that its lassitude deigns not
to destroy him. Even one Angel
 is terrible.

He looks up, and looks at *it*,
and for a while, returns to writing.
There is a poem, after all, to finish,
the summoned inner voice must have
its fill until the rounded line is reached.

His reticence, as the Angel watches
patiently, lets it suffice that such Beauty
is seen from the corner of one eye;
it is well that he does not speak to It,
letting the pen invoke his terror,
spare him the muffled croak of sobbing.

(O Love that has gone before,
to and beyond the tomb,
this is no harbinger of reunion!
We who have lived with raven
and crow and the lurking vulture
take no comfort from wingbeats.)

Night. *Night*. Let the Angel come sideways,
halo'd at the edge of vision, winged
but still as the sculpted head of Hermes
that flickers on his candled book-case.

Let the Angel come gradually. Let him wait
until the pen is closed, the manuscript
turned over so the dead may read it
as their faces press upward; let it wait
until he stands, and bows & makes inquiry
on what business an Angel should be about.



3

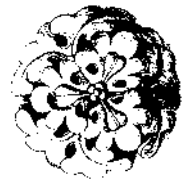
HIS, THE DEEP NIGHT

Night. *Night*. Wary of those who come
with just a midnight's yearning, he waits
for sign or sigil, a blazon'd sword or staff.
Nothing. White dust in air would be
as vague, white chalk on board left ghost
by hurried erasure, as legible. What use,
this Angel, if the being is what he appears?
Men have given him little, books much.
What could an incorporeal creature tell him?
How readily these sentient ones,
these brutish Gabriels with perfect teeth,
perceive our need, and our world-malaise.
Here one moment, and gone the next,
Angels alienate; they make us doubt
the truth of the sight-interpreted world.

Words up *his* sleeves, the poet knows
how artfully we weave our sights into
transcendent cloaks.
There lingers, perhaps, and taking root
for more than its outward worth
the Ordinary made Sublime:
some tree on a hill, to be seen
each day with new utility and hope;

the counterfeit loves that arrived
during yesterday's walk, now pressed
between denials and dried;

add, too, the old housebroken loyalty
of habits that liked him and stayed
and never gave notice, and, finally,
that half-a-world that he envelops at dusk,
already his kingdom with no admittance
required by benediction or grace, *his*,
the Night, *his* the deep Night,
when pin-prick wind
feeds on his face from cosmic spaces.
He looks at it; the Angel regards him.
There is no gesture of going, or staying.
He has not offered it a chair, nor poured
a second cup of tea (as if a phantom
needed rest or stimulant!). It has not smiled
or offered a word of comfort. Male
or female, being of dark or light,
mute if messenger, closed hands
and clenched jaw not of caresses
made or expected, for whom
would this dis-enchanter
stay? longed for by all, painfully draped
from trees for lonely hearts to admire —
if it is not about love, what is it?



Somewhere in a ruined abbey
is a black, unyielding bell,
its clapper of life long gone, so that
nothing save the hammer-blow
of final Apocalypse can ring it.

He thinks, *Can this be lighter for lovers?*
Does the Angel come with a clarion,
the high trilling of silver bells?
Go off then, he thinks. Your business
is with some fool in love, not me.

Lovers! They only deceive themselves!
When will they learn? Throw out your
loneliness: it is but air from the absence
of arms to encircle you.
Exhale the idea. Gift it to birds —
at least they will use the lift of it for flight.



4 WHAT IS A POET FOR?

Springs needed him. Stars arching up
from winter sleep awaited the names
with which he'd anchor them. What
is a poet for? Waves from the past
anticipated the nights he'd call them back.

Sometimes, on city street, he'd hear
a violin surrender itself to bow and arm
behind an open window-way. What
is a poet for? to make of anything
and everything a Heaven, all with words;
to beat down Hell, if that is what
the story indicates. This was entrusted him,
and to a few others before and after.

But he seldom equaled it. Was he
not always led off by expectations,
made the fool by mere coincidence,
as though all this were signaling
there was someone he was supposed
to love? (He stalked immensities
on his pages, but lovers stalked *him*,
their shaggy sentiments going in and out,
and sometimes even staying
until the sparrows awoke him).

If even *one* were love, why did
those pages piled high not earn
and keep some fair companion? Why now
this incorporeal Angel accusing him?

Sample Pages Only





ABOUT THE POET

Brett Rutherford, born in Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, began writing poetry seriously during a stay in San Francisco. During his college years at Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania, he published an underground newspaper and printed his first hand-made poetry chapbook. He moved to New York City, where he founded The Poet's Press in 1971. For more than twenty years, he worked as an editor, journalist, printer, and consultant to publishers and nonprofit organizations.

After a literary pilgrimage to Providence, Rhode Island, on the track of H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, he moved there with his press. *Poems From Providence* was the fruit of his first three years in the city (1985-1988), published in 1991. Since then, he has written a study of Edgar Allan Poe and Providence poet Sarah Helen Whitman (briefly Poe's fiancée), a biographical play about Lovecraft, and his second novel, *The Lost Children* (Zebra Books, 1988). His poetry, in volumes both thematic and chronological, can be found in *Poems From Providence* (1991, 2011), *Things Seen in Graveyards* (2007), *Twilight of the Dictators* (1992, 2009), *The Gods As They Are, On their Planets* (2005, 2012), *Whippoorwill Road: The Supernatural Poems* (1998, 2005, 2012), and *An Expectation of Presences* (2012). His most recent collection is *The Inhuman Wave* (2020).

Returning to school for a master's degree in English, Rutherford completed this project in 2007, and worked for University of Rhode Island in distance learning, and taught for the Gender and Women's Studies Department. There, he created courses on "The Diva," "Women in Science Fiction," and "Radical American Women."

He has prepared annotated editions of Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Tales of Wonder*, the poetry of Charles Hamilton Sorley, A.T. Fitzroy's antiwar novel *Despised and Rejected*, and the collected writings of Emilie Glen and Barbara A. Holland.

His interests include classical music and opera, and Latin American music; Chinese art, history and literature; bicycling, graveyards, woods, horror films, intellectual history, and crimes against nature.

Retiring from his workaday life in early 2016, Rutherford moved to the Squirrel Hill neighborhood in Pittsburgh where he continues to write, study music, and run The Poet's Press.

Sample Pages Only

ART CREDITS

Cover: Digital art from detail of *Archangel Michael Tramples Satan*. Guido Reni (1575-1642). Oil on canvas. Santa Maria della Concezione, Rome.

Facing Title-page. Angel depicted in a Persian illuminated manuscript.

Inside title page: Detail of a Greek funerary stele, Metropolitan Museum, New York City.

Facing page 30: Tomb inscription of Helmanus Gulielmus at Santa Maria Formosa, Venice. Photo from Wikimedia Commons by "Jodo50931," 2007.

Facing Page 43. Digital art watercolor from photo of the *Hermes Ingenui*. Roman copy from Second Century BCE after a Greek original of the Fifth Century BCE. Vatican Museum. Based on a photo by Marie Lan Nguyen, 2009, from Wikimedia Commons.

Facing pages 50 and 53: Greek funerary stelae. Metropolitan Museum, New York City.

Page 55. Another Greek funerary stone, location unknown.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The work on these poems started in 1976, an attempt to translate, adapt, and expand upon the first two of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. The project was abandoned, the sketches only rediscovered in late 2019. In April 2020, I decided to complete the project, revising and expanding the original sketches and making them into a connected cycle of 21 poems.

This cycle is in no way an explication of Rilke, and the German poet would doubtless be horrified at the thought of a young atheist, neo-Romantic American poet of the 1970s making a palimpsest over his work, with the shades of Shelley, Walt Whitman, Poe, and even H. P. Lovecraft looking over his shoulder. That Rilke himself stepped away from the *Elegies* after writing the first two, only returning to the project some years later, gives some indication of the daunting power of *Elegies 1 and 2*. I, too, unsure of what I had done, and what was to be done with it, put the project aside.

Some of my recent work with translations and adaptations gave me the self-confidence to return to this perilous project, this time trusting my own voice and letting even more expansion emerge from the original material. If I have succeeded, Rilke's own words fit seamlessly into the flow of my own. I was in his thrall for a number of years, and his *Letters to a Young Poet* gave me comfort and inspiration when it was not coming from those around me. I already had a sense that in poems such as this, one is being "lived through" by language, creating a freestanding work that has its own existence, its own right to be.

To illustrate this book I turned to some of the Greek sculpture that makes clear some of Rilke's language about the vocabulary of touching in classic sculpture, and I was able to find a photo of the Latin tomb inscription Rilke found in Venice and copied down. I introduced the god Hermes, who, as a messenger of the gods, served the same role as messenger angels to the Greeks. These visual embellishments may help the reader

recreate the visual elements of Rilke's musings on angels, on sculpture, and on Beauty in general.

The connecting subjects of *The Poet*, *The Angel*, and *The Arrow* are not from Rilke, who frequently uses "we" as his subject, subsuming the reader into his visions. I have detached this and made my poet a doubter, a skeptic, and one of Love's wounded. In this sense it is an interrogatory, whose only answer is that the Angel, despite all, *exists*.

I have no further explanation to offer. I could not paraphrase the "meaning" of this cycle if I tried. It passed through me on the way to the page. It will now have a life of its own.

The body type of this book is set in 14-point Adobe Jensen, an oldstyle serif font designed by Robert Slimbach. The Roman face is based on a font cut by Venetian printer Nicolas Jenson around 1470. Since many oldstyle fonts did not incorporate italics, those for this font are based on a set created around 1520 by Ludovico Vincentino degli Arrighi.

Small titles are set in Morris Golden, a font created by William Morris for the Kelmscott Press in 1890. This modern digital recreation of the type by the P22 Type Foundry simulates the soft-edged impression of hand-set metal type on hand-made paper. Morris in turn based his designs on typefaces created by Nicolas Jenson. Larger titles are set in Solemnis, an uncial-style font designed by Günter Gerhard Lange in 1953. Lange created many classic revival fonts for the Berthold foundry, leading that organization through the eras of metal, photo and then digital type design.

The book has been decorated with historic printers' initials and details of Gothic architectural borders to honor and evoke the tradition of the illuminated monk's manuscript.

Sample Pages Only