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Poems

by Mary O'Donnell

Heron and the Women

Quiet and still,
those mornings when walkers
suddenly pounce, with dogs
ripping muscular through the wind
on the far side of the canal.

Female voices,
he hears their heat as
if released.
He is a study in grey
a match for the silence
absent in their words.

When they see him,
it's too late. He has lifted,
spread his wings
against gravity, above
the careless spirals of words.

Sometimes,
they witness the grace
of wing-tilt and wind,
the dangling twig legs.

Ancient symbols appear,
as on a page,
to remain unread,
wet inks of a script dropped
from above as he flies,
to settle only, when dogs
are restrained,
and the canal is vellum.

Dolphins

We were watching from the shore
as he kayaked in the bay,
heading for the shallows.
His twelve-year shoulders
had lately begun
to bulk, stretch, and
in his eyes no shadows.

It happened suddenly –
a pod, first one dolphin
arced beside the vessel,
and he smiled, kept paddling.
Then a noose of them
burst from the calm,
up and over his head,
down the other side, beneath,
swept up again to fly at play
a circle of salt-spattered light
and shattered sea-crystal.

He, startled, went still, then alarmed,
cried out to us on shore,
though we smiled and waved
in excitement. Then a sudden flip
and plunge to the depths,
the whole pod bearing
his secret message to the deeps,
beyond the hotel
on the cliff, beyond
domino rows of beach homes,
away from us, his family.

He was growing.
So they came, these emissaries,
preparing him for sirens on land,
the clear eyes of girls who'd try him.
One way or another.

Crow Knowledge

By All Hallows, the sympathy of crows
fills the evening air as light fades, and souls
warm thin feet against a screen of blazing birch.

They falter across a field of winter corn,
bewildered, on an earth no longer theirs.
How they long to lie abed, as tight in flesh

as crows are in feather, ruffed together,
still bound to life. But the scald crows warn:
this day and no further may you roam.

Clearing skies make way for gods of frost,
souls shiver at the memory of fires,
wines, red meat. They recall smiles too

and themselves, once, raucous as the crows
that scold them now. These black guardians
tilt low, call 'Time!' with beak and claw.

As November's shim-clouds lock
beneath the horizon, their dark wings ferry
the malingerers to eternity's twig-dark roost.

Homewards across the Bog of Allen

The same weekly trip, bypassing towns, quick tics of winking windows
from a distant village where the sun glints. You're distracted by etiolated clouds
in late afternoon, when sun breaks between one road sculpture and the next:

bog oak and six moon phases, all copper burnish, starkly lit. Your life
amounts to segments of waxing and waning, where even decline is growth,
and finds dignity. Behind the moons, the lipped bog, hickory brown, then stacked banks

where the *sleán* cuts deep. You'd stop the car if you could, tumble into a heartland
where no village or town can grow, the rapacious wind composing long notes
in winter's fret, the birch, the rowan – here a lament, there a reel.

Further out, the composition of ancient self continues – a blackened slurch of turf,
wild to the end. No grief here as some bog-imp digs up, wriggles out, lifts and tucks you
to itself, fondles your spirit in the sun's final flicker, ferries you, almost virgin,

like a gift to the planes of night.