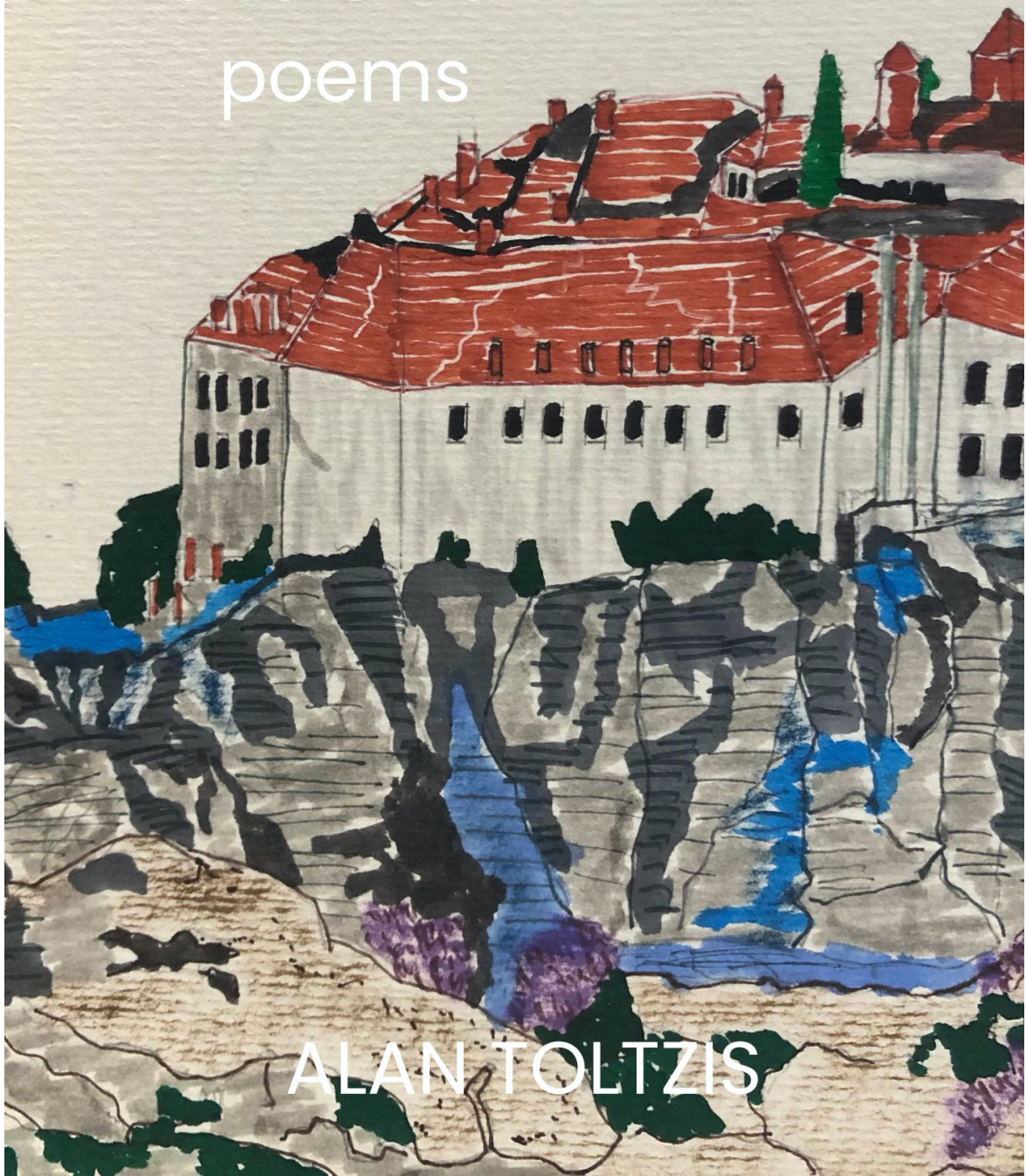


RED WOLF EDITIONS

EARTH BOUND
and other
poems



ALAN TOLTZIS

Earth Bound and Other Poems

Alan Toltzis



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Earth Bound

One night, I will swap pillows
for rocks and dream
of angels, God, and heaven.
For now, the sky is heavy
with fret. The weight of earth
falls from invisible cracks
feathering my ceiling. Plaster dust
rims my eyes most mornings.

Song Without Moonlight

I try to overcome
my natural reticence
but words stick in my throat.

For two months
the moon hasn't found me.
I've stopped looking for her.
Is it low clouds,
the angle of the eaves,
a skewed viewpoint?

The ocean rocks uneasy tonight,
uncertain when to rush the shore,
when to cower and hide.
Drizzle settles on shriveled wild plums,
dotting the dunes. It's six months
until fresh ones take their place,
a mixture of ripe and rot
abuzz with flies.

A trickle of salty, silvery mist
beads up on resinous clusters
of poisonous bayberries,
redolent with temptation.

Tonight, I will become a warbler
and choke gray-green berries
down my throat whole.

Unfamiliar Terrain

Driving a new car, in a new town,
in grinding traffic, switching lanes,
not knowing their curves
or my blind spots,
fumbling for controls—
nothing's where it should be.
The radio grates off-kilter rhythms.
The GPS displays the wrong destination.

But it's not long before
that same music
plays near the ground meat
in the supermarket aisle.
Blood pools
where cellophane meets Styrofoam.

I look up some night
and think it's morning
because the moon
is full again,
its craters staring
me down in bed.

Process notes: Visiting or moving to a new area can be disorienting and feel surreal. I was trying to capture that experience in this poem.

Texas

I flew
into the west Texas sunset,
miles of brown-grey plains
rigged and pumping under me.
The day deepened like love,
the way orange paint
dies back
two shades
as it dries.

Process notes: Sometimes, I carry images around with me for decades before they work their way into a poem. That's the case here. Once, I watched miles and miles of oil wells as I was flying to the West coast. About 30 years later, after I had painted a door the same shade as that sunset, I was reminded of the view from the window of the plane and wrote the poem.

Supplicant
for Claudia

Caressing your cello
(not child, not lover),
you draw the bow across wound
metal strings, coaxing air into sound.
Its resonance resonates within you,
the core of you reverberating.

Within me,
your supple grace
notes and trills
rejoice
like prayers and supplications
granted but never fully deserved.

Process Notes: I write a poem every year for our wedding anniversary. This one was written for our 38th.

Love Poem

The temperature went to 75
in February.
Everyone played like it was June,
even our trees.

Their buds bulged
with unformed leaves
and unformed fruit.

Lovers ignored the warnings:
thunderstorms to mark the start
of the warm spell,
thunderstorms to take it all away.

The trees noticed
but continued to burst anyway,
their juices surging.

Process notes: I wrote this after seeing the movie *Paterson*, which is full of poems by Ron Padgett. Hearing and reading poetry relaxed the tone of my work, at least for a while.

Nest Building

The first few years, mud and struggle
filled our yard. Longing for birdsong,
you played tapes of songbirds,
and kept a cage of finches.

Now, magnetite, DNA, scent, and star,
faithfully guide our sparrows.

Flitting

darting

from

sycamore

to cherry

to deck,

back

they
gather up bits of chickweed,
oak twig, twine, cedar scrap,
grass, and bark,
constructing yet another nest
under the retracted awning,
and the air sings
crescendos of lilting reassurance
that biology and fate
will lift us homeward.

Process notes: The poem tells the back story. The sparrows arrived a couple weeks ago this year too.

Red-Tail

1.

Hungry again,
hawk spreads its feathers
ascending
aloft invisible updrafts

to choose
the unsuspecting
in the stubble
of last summer's cornfield.

2.

Sharp squeals, like laughter,
ripple through squalls and drifts.
Atop a pole,
hawk ruffles its tail

abiding.

3.

Earth's shadow
creeps across the moon.
Snow-light, bright as washed bone,
eclipses its glow.

Hawk tucks its head
into its shoulder
comforting itself
as a green comet sizzles
invisibly far away.

Process notes: While the poem started with the hawk, celestial events often work their way into my work. This one has two from February— the Snow Moon Penumbral Eclipse on Friday night February 10 and the green Comet 45P/Honda-Mrkos-Pajdušáková, which made its closest approach early Saturday morning (Feb. 11) at about 3 a.m. EST passing within 7.4 million miles of Earth. There was also a snowstorm that week that worked its way into section 2.

New Year Omens

1.
The tangled crown
of bare wisteria emerges,
woven and frozen against the spreading sky.

In all these years, I only remember
a few blooms under the joists
or at the edges of the pergola.

You remember heavy clusters in late spring,
if the pruning was done right.
Next May will tell us.

2.
Up ahead,
metal scraps, like twisted light,
glance the right lane,
a lone hubcap rocking,
the broken white line, its fulcrum,
while a man in shirtsleeves,
with hands in jeans pockets
that force him into a shrug,
slouches down the road from his stalled car
towards the doe,
her paralyzed body heavy and calm
but still able to raise her head
the moist nose twitching,
air steaming from her nostrils
inhaling familiar scents
—field and winter. . . some dormant grass—
now tinged with purple smears of sorrow and shame
as he approaches like a compulsion urging him forward,
when only waiting will bring an answer.

Process notes: An early draft of the poem had a reference to the highway (Route 95), but I didn't know until later that day that the highway would become a distinct section of the poem because of the incident with the deer.

Ringling Rocks Park

Uprooted,
the underside of a tree steams,
its unsightly crawl
of dirt and decay clinging
to a hairy mesh of roots.

By all rights,
these displaced things,
unused to autumn light
yellowing in early afternoon,
should flee.
But this unseemly ganglion
continues to seethe and twist.

In the bright sun
of the adjacent boulder field,
the live rocks sing
their muted requiem,
each striking its own clear tone.

Process notes: I live outside of Philadelphia, close to Ringling Rocks State Park, but had never heard of it until last year when it made a list of top 10 spookiest places in the country. So my wife and I set out to explore. The park earns its name because of its 8-acre boulder field of “live rocks” that ring like a bell when they are hit with a hammer. Only a few places in the world have rocks like this. Take a listen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5cJbcoWaH8> The music starts around 1:13 and while the rocks ring for anyone, most people can’t make music like this!

The Gaining of Wisdom

Stuffing one last bit
of moist green leaf into his bulging maw,
caterpillar felt something
new—
he was full.

His fearsome, snake-eyed skin
stretched
and split
as he spit a filament-wide hammock
that solidified in midair.
More goo buttoned him to a twig
among his lacy chronicles
of nonstop feasting.

Muscular, peristaltic wriggling
rid him of his last rag of beauty.
It fell away
revealing the luminous, ringed sarcophagus
that was always within.

Immobile and shielded,
he would never eat again
or crawl,
or spin.

By knowing what was inside him,
everything
was about to change.

Process notes: The poem itself went through a lot of change and revision. It started as an exploration of whether we can truly be aware of another's needs. I then started wondering about self-awareness and if we could anticipate our own needs as we change and grow. That led me to the caterpillar and the striking differences as it changes from caterpillar to chrysalis. The poem ended up saying something different about beauty and how it can hamper and then lead to self-discovery and appreciation of differences.

140,000,000 Miles Away

Towards the summit a thousand times taller
than anything it climbed before,
Spirit trudged upward

hurtling data home for sols on end
where it assembled into landscapes—
postcards from a world I'll never enter.

It shifts into reverse
converting its stuck wheel
from anchor to harrow.

A track becomes a furrow
revealing a stripe of white and yellow crystals
gleaming a few inches below red dirt.

Once upon a time
they dissolved
in water that overflowed lakebeds

or meandered through
banked and deep river valleys.
Water ran swiftly etching the bedrock.

Here the task is harder:
look deeply and learn
the true nature of trees,

judge the strength
and weakness of people,
feel the promise of the land,

while squinting into the glare
of proximity
just beyond the horizon.

Process notes: Sometimes it's easier to explore dispassionately without bringing your self in. The poem compares the experience of the Mars Rover, Spirit to our own experience closer to home. The word "sol" (pronounced "soul") is a Martian day, which is little longer than a day on Earth.

Noah

It was a sublime deal
sealed with a rainbow
flexed across the sky and through the clouds.
No pressure, but what's next?
Noah got drunk.

Because, how do you get up,
scratch yourself, piss,
make coffee, kiss
the wife and kids and
just get on with it?

While nature continues, nonplussed,
we are left with just
the ordinary,
unrelenting, pick-up-a-loaf-of-bread,
grind-it-out, and don't-forget-the-milk kind of stuff.

As sure as that 6:52
sunrise
bestows the tragedy of another everyday sorrow
upon us,
we brace ourselves,
ready again to be heroes.

Process notes: The ancient Greeks knew audiences needed a release after the intensity of drama and their playwrights wrote plays as a 4-part series: a dramatic trilogy and then a fourth play—the tragic-comic satyr play. But that need for release after heroic and tragic events can be traced much earlier, to the story of Noah. My poem looks at the Biblical event that happens immediately after the flood and how that connects with modern day life.

Scale

In slow motion
small white patches
on the azalea stems
and under its leaves
are ravaging it.

*

Without a word,
our two white birches
instinctively offer
pages of curled blank bark.

*

What's happening
to the roots
of our crape myrtle
in this killing cold?

*

When warmth feels impossible,
I remember
the pink phalanx of cherry trees
welcoming me back to a parking lot
in California.

Process notes: "Scale" began after meditating on the idea of how a small change, barely visible on the surface, can indicate something much more troubling internally. That led me to the scale on my azaleas, the deep cold now, and my optimism for spring soon.

The True Nature of Imaginary Things

Imaginary rats lurk in my kitchen.
These rats lack something:
Guile. Purpose. Intent.
I worry I'll tread on one in the dark.
I flick the lights and bristle,
sensing a rat, slick with sickness,
in the corner.
A ridge of fur stiffens and glistens
along the curve of its spine.
Early one morning, I startle another one.
Tiny feet click-click-click, like gravel
strewn across tile, when it tries to dart
under a table.
There is no table in my kitchen.
The rat freezes midway across the Saltillo tile floor.
It means no harm. Imaginary evil never does.
Rats are too busy with rat business;
with being a rat.
Once, a friend caught one in a trap,
drove to the lake, submerged it for 10 minutes,
and left it there.
The rat beat him home.

Cicada Serenade

A halo of summer-weary sycamore leaves
curl and wither under the scrutiny of noon.

The sun burns white as moonlight.
Earth's abuzz with fresh decline

heralded by cicadas
chanting ancient emergent death rattles.

Strewn around them, hollow,
iridescent cinders, of some born earlier,

their nymphs underground,
awaiting resurrection.

Process notes: This was a big year for cicadas and I started noticing their beautiful iridescent bodies as they died. That, more than their music was where this poem started for me.

The Cuckoo and the Warbler

The monotony of wings, of water, of life churrs everywhere, when hunger coaxes a reed warbler from her nest for a few moments.

Just like that, a cuckoo lays her dead ringer of a speckled egg among three sister eggs. Off she goes. And the warblers?

They suspect nothing. Minding four eggs is as easy as three. But in two weeks all hell breaks loose. The cuckoo hatchling

is first to crack out of its shell. Each time the warblers leave their nest, to collect food, the hellion's ungainly body

and greedy soul transform into a bald, blind, and feeble Sisyphus—rolling, pushing, grappling with the eggs, one, by one, by one.

This murderous combination of disloyalty and disguise will not be denied until the first egg, perched on its scraggly scapulae breaches

the top of the nest. A final crazed push hoists the first of the warbler eggs up and over. It plops into the water below and bobs away.

Each egg of betrayal becomes easier to toss. With one mouth to feed, the cuckoo dwarfs its parents, full-grown in two weeks.

Still, they continue to feed their demon until the nest's integrity overflowing with deceit, collapses under the burden of deception.

The End of the World

*God destroyed Noah's generation
because the earth was full of petty theft.
Sanhedrin 108a*

Alone, in the produce aisle,
I pluck and palm
a single green grape,
the cool globe
smooth as a worn stone.
As if clearing my throat,
I cover my mouth and savor
a sweetly crisp explosion of flavor.
Theft worth less a cent. Drop
by drop insignificance,
surges unnoticed—a deluge
of unending violence, inundating
the last ark of honesty, afloat
in swarming swells of indifference.

Restoration

Did I wear you out?
Did I leave you spent,
tattered, cut, bruised?

And when,
O weary, weary soul,
you left me again last night,

barely able to fill
and empty my lungs,
I waited for morning,

my body
and my heart
awash with you again.

Today will be different.
Today will be pure.

Today will be
a waxing crescent
moon at dawn.

About the Author



Alan Toltzis is the author of two poetry collections—*49 Aspects of Human Emotion* and *The Last Commandment*—and two chapbooks, *Nature Lessons* and *Mercy. Earth Bound* is his fifth book. His poems have appeared in numerous print and online publications and he was runner up for the Thomas Merton Poetry Prize in Poetry of the Sacred. Alan serves as poetry editor for *Dark Onus Lit* and Poetica Publishing. After a lifetime in Philadelphia, he now lives in Los Angeles. Find him online at alantoltzis.com; follow him @ToltzisAlan.