

## **St Francis and the Grasshopper**

Snow falls heavy and silent,  
a lake of white flakes,  
Francis peers out the window,  
time for night prayer,  
his brothers still tucked  
away in their beds.

He steps out into drifts  
which reach his knees,  
breathes in the icy air,  
makes puffs of smoke,  
arrives to the chapel  
and sits and waits.

The heavy door opens  
an inch, two green  
antennae wave gently,  
then large dark eyes appear,  
long slender legs  
and a soft swirl of snow.

Francis smiles at this friend  
who leaps from the doorway  
to land right beside him,  
rubs her legs together  
to create music for the psalms,  
which he sings off-key.

They sit together a long time  
in song and silence.

After a while they depart  
leaving tracks in the snow,  
from the arcs and loops, you can tell  
they each danced their way home.

## **St Melangell and the Hare**

Melangell sails the Irish sea  
to the wilds of Wales,  
flees a marriage and seeks time  
alone among a storm of hawthorn,  
feeds on hazelnuts and dandelions,  
gathers lady's mantle each morning  
to sip their dew, plunges her hands  
in the river, freezing and fresh,  
sleeps on moss in the cave-close stone,  
delights at birdsong, seeks  
the sacred in hunger and rain.

One warm day, her quiet disrupted,  
hot breath of men and hounds  
approach, jaws wide,  
teeth gleam,  
foam sputters,  
tails swish slowly,  
scrabble for a hare with brown legs  
bounding, a great roar of wet fur  
and whiskers until the hare  
leaps into the folds of Melangell's  
cloak, defiant stands the saint,  
draws a circle around herself.  
Dogs and men can go no further.

Melangell strokes the hare's ears,  
soothes his clanging heart,  
whispers "you are safe now"  
as howls recede on the wind  
and the valley becomes sanctuary.

You can still glimpse it  
on sun-sparkled days when bluebells  
sway and oak leaves rustle  
from squirrel-scurry-scamper  
and you take the soft hare  
of your life into your arms,  
whisper into those long ears  
blessings all down her trembling  
length and remind her that  
she too no longer needs to run.

## **St. Columba and His Horse**

An old man hobbles down the road  
toward the monastery gate,  
rests on a roadside stone,  
hears clip-clopping of hooves  
and his faithful companion arrive.

The horse nuzzles Columba's shoulder,  
shudders all down his white length  
eyes shine round and brown,  
great teardrops pool  
and fall like rain.

Columba rests his forehead  
against the broad horse skull,  
closes his eyes and each imagines  
the other, galloping together across  
heather and buttercups.

The horse knows his friend  
will soon be leaving and mourns  
this coming loss, his hoof  
scrapes the ground, tries to write  
a word of goodbye,

then takes wildflowers in his teeth,  
extends them to the saint, as if to say  
his life was full of beauty and color,  
but the petals are already wilting  
in the summer sun.

The wisdom of old sages rings,  
“remember you will die” and on another day  
this would prompt Columba to celebrate  
the gift of a new morning, but today  
death is as close as the horse’s warm nostrils,

he knows everything must  
end, even this love, Columba  
rests there a long while  
breathing in scent of fur and fields,  
lets his cloak be soaked with tears.

## **Holy Cow**

Some days I envy St. Brigid's  
devoted white cow  
standing firm in the field,  
wide nose sniffing the air,  
endless milk for a hungry world.

If only I could stand  
four-legged, day after day  
while deep inside  
an alchemy of rain,  
grass, and clover unfolds.

I'd trade all my doubts  
for hooves and horns, to know  
no matter how I spend my days,  
generosity wells up without  
my even needing to try.

## **St. Columba and the Crane**

Columba has a vision:  
a crane battered by wind and rain  
would tumble to Iona's shores  
in three turns of sun and moon,  
the third hour before evening.

At the appointed time  
she slumps her slender  
body across grass still soaked  
from storm, down fluttering,  
her voice strained, then silent.

Columba sends a monk to greet her,  
gather her tenderly into his solid  
arms, lift her all hollow bone  
and white feathers, welcome  
this weary one to the hearth.

Crane comes as pilgrim  
buffeted by elements into exile,  
a stranger at the door,  
three days later, renewed, revived,  
enough time for a resurrection,

she lifts her wide wings gently  
at first, then with greater force  
to carry herself back across sea  
and threshold, her flight a prayer  
of gratitude and homecoming.

## **St. Brigid and the Oystercatchers**

She runs fierce and swift  
while men give chase  
heart beating wildly  
until she reaches water's edge  
and can go no more.

Hearing their angry shouts  
of menace on the wind,  
she falls to soft sand,  
lets gravity receive her  
until her breath slows  
and she feels at one with the sea.

Oystercatchers circle overhead,  
an apparition in white and black  
orange bills gather dilisk,  
carragheen, algae,  
create a wild blanket of green  
and rust until she vanishes  
and becomes the shore.

The men run past,  
mistake the gentle rise and fall  
under a pile of seaweed and grass  
for the rhythm of the sea  
and Brigid sits up slowly,  
the birds encircle her,  
nibble on winkles and limpets,  
a seaside feast of communion.

Her eyes fill with large drops  
that splash from wet lashes,  
then comes laughter rising  
from her gut, weeping and joy  
together like a song  
as they land on her  
shoulders, arms, and hands.

Sometimes we have to yield  
our bodies fully to earth's embrace,  
to taste the end so near  
to feel hope slip away like a boat  
across sea's foam surface,  
before we can feel the truth again  
of how things hidden  
can become a revelation  
and heaven is there in the cries  
of birds, among waves and sand.

## **Ravens**

They gather one by one,  
glossy coal-colored feathers,  
long cone beaks peck  
at seeds I scattered,  
dark eyes alert,  
they arrive expectant,  
pigeons and starling depart  
to make way for sounds  
of squaws and caws.

Legend says St. Benedict's life  
was saved by a raven,  
Elijah and St. Paul  
in the hungry wild  
each had raven friends  
bring them bread.  
Someone once told me  
if you feed the ravens  
they bring you gifts.

I discover the truth of this  
each morning as they save me  
with their full-throated  
presence, sometimes  
jackdaws and magpies come  
too, but mostly they arrive  
with dark thick wings,  
make their voice heard,  
and revel in being fed.

**Ross Errilly Friary\***

A plague draped the land  
in black loss, carved new  
hollows, summoned wailing  
from the four directions

until an angel came  
in a dream: *build*  
*a sanctuary, go west*  
*until you see the sign.*

They walk toward  
the sun's descent, orange  
blaze perched on the horizon  
then dark like the inside of a crow,

monks rest among granite  
and hawthorn by the Black River,  
hear its song in the darkness,  
follow its flow into night

until the moment when  
before the sun emerged again  
three swans rise up  
into the violet sky

a vision in white and feathers  
holding clusters of flax  
in their bright bills,  
they circle once,  
twice,

three times overhead,

the monks follow  
beneath their airy rounds,  
find a thousand purple  
blooms in midwinter.

Sometimes we have to listen,  
follow a dream into darkness,  
a trail of stars  
that vanishes behind us,

allow ourselves to be swallowed,  
to feel the widening  
of our wings and the cracking  
open of our petals.

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