

**Susan Edwards Richmond** – Five Poems  
*Feature Poet*



**Pelagic**

*Cook Strait, November*

1. *Set*

No Vineyard ferry ride  
this. Gales  
batten a side door.  
Wedge. Out:

not the passenger deck,  
just a few cleared feet  
to stand in.

A life raft clangs overhead,  
slips through its chains.

2. *Background*

A full day and night of crossing,  
I became pelagic to arrive here,  
to this island, these,  
following a daughter  
fledging,  
closing my eyes through the longest  
sleepless night of my life,  
finding birds upon landing  
*grounding,*  
*airing,* me.

### 3. *Sightings*

Sea grey, sky grey, grey wind  
and salt between. From behind  
the curtain mist, materialize

long lanky wings low  
on the waves, then rising,  
ghost form out of ghost fog,

broad black brush across back  
wingtip to wingtip, white head,  
tail, belly, an image stowed.

Guidebook in steerage,  
names only in  
consciousness,

my mind takes its notes,  
hands thrust in gloves  
clamped on binoculars, afraid

to let drop, to lose  
my field. Next slide:  
a boomerang of black over water,

bounds high out of view,  
then returns,  
a ribbon to the visible.

Next: another giant,  
black wings white plank  
body crests waves

in the distance, pulled  
just above with each swell  
as though by string.

Next: close in, hugging the ship,  
a pair of sooty backs, divided faces,  
gray up, white below

seamless. Last: mottled black  
and white topsides of wings,  
another pair trail, crisscross the wake.

4. *Lost*

Minutes go by, an hour,  
no one comes to find me,  
no one knows I'm here.  
The ship pitches and rolls.  
How easy to disappear.

5. *Accord*

Bludgeoned by the strait  
as vast as open ocean,

anchorless, no context,  
beating towards never land,

is it sport to see how high  
we can catch in the wind's gears,

or are we seekers of solace  
in leeward company

no bearings but ourselves  
steering each other home?

Note: The birds described in *Sightings* are, in order, mollymawk, black petrel, northern royal albatross, fluttering shearwater, Cape pigeon.

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**Moths**

circle a low flame in pillars of late  
afternoon. So many russeted sylphs  
spin on feathery fulcrums, buffeting  
my hands, arms, face, bumping up against lips,  
soft, drab wings seeking entrance. I follow  
one, two, three, four—omnidirectional.

They won't alight, like a winged "Upside Down,"  
whirling from pine closet to ragged road.  
This walk is for clarity, where light streams

in high windows, moth spun blackout curtains  
shudder open. No more shades, a new  
house rises, three stories from the walkout,  
maples eye level from the kitchen deck.

I will bring boxes up from my own cedar  
closets, pages from books, letters of love  
and indifference, and carry them across  
the Assabet, shake them out above grass-  
spiked gravel in view of the marshes, set  
them to flutter in flocked spirals until  
they are indistinguishable from these.

\*

### **Googling Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in the National Wildlife Refuge**

*Here I am. Where are you?*  
Music cues a slightly off-kilter

duet, the phone bird louder,  
clearer. It seems a mean trick

so I shut it off, but now know  
I should be ashamed using

this modern day birding-by-ear,  
as a bicyclist speeds by on Harry's Way,

sees the phone in my hand:  
Am I texting? Checking Facebook?

*Here I am. Where are you?*  
The cracked road swallows me,

grasses rise up from the center  
ridge, black-eyed Susan's, birds-

foot trefoil, clover. Voices  
follow me as I shed what history

has been known to call civilization.  
Errand lists. Emails to address.

Day slides, the sun a measured weight  
falling into a screen of sifting song.

\*

### **Three Ducks**

1.

He comes over the ridge  
from the parking lot, in camouflage,  
hands cupped, full of the dead,

smaller, so much smaller  
than life, these emissaries  
from beyond the spotting scope.

2.

*bufflehead drake*

Black patchwork head transcends  
to iridescence, rainbow quilled; rarely seen  
serrations on the parted bill.

The name suggests a glass bubble  
float, held beneath the surface  
suddenly let go.

*lesser scaup hen*

Browns and grays, subtle shades,

vermiculated wings

forced to spread for our pleasure.

Peaked head, diagnostic, nearly

futile to detect in life, white

crescent clear of blood or shot.

*longtail drake*

Riding a winter wave, the tail

arrests our gaze, the fashionable

cap, the formal dress.

Now, tiny in the hand, even the tail

diminished, confusion of snow

rock feathers on a black sea.

3.

I'm like the rest. I'd turn away

if I could, but the nearness,

the absolute precision of beauty

impossible at a distance,

draws me in. I describe what I can't

bear, live what I can.

\*

**On Receiving the Gift of Wei Ying-wu from the Poet  
on the Same Day the Maple Tree Came Down**

*for Red Pine*

In consolation, as though you knew  
there was a hole in the center of the yard  
that would never again be filled,  
you inscribed well wishes on the fiber  
given by another tree in another time  
and sent the book to my door from your own  
home state, binding country together  
west to east. Kneeling at the stump  
sapped of any upright strength, I read  
through a shower of silvery words.  
After autumn ghost leaves turn and fill  
the circle where now sunlight dances  
as never before, I will hold your words  
as I look up to watch the winter sky.

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**Susan Edwards Richmond** is the author of five poetry collections: *Before We Were Birds* (2017), *Increase* (2010), *Purgatory Chasm* (2007), *Birding in Winter* (2006), and *Boto* (2002). Her poems have appeared in *Appalachia*, *Blueline*, *The Iowa Review*, *Poetry East*, *Runes*, and *Sanctuary: the Journal of the Massachusetts Audubon Society*. She is poet-in-residence at Old Frog Pond Farm & Studio in Harvard, MA, where she curates a Poem of the Month and organizes an annual plein air poetry walk and chapbook. An avid naturalist, Susan teaches in Mass Audubon's Drumlin Farm Community Preschool and enjoys hiking, canoeing, and travel with her husband and two daughters. Her website is [www.susanedwardsrichmond.com](http://www.susanedwardsrichmond.com).