



Phil Rodenbeck

Three Poems

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Mussel

I've seen how the wave comes in on a rock,  
hunching outward like a shoulder blade  
from the sea's dark back,  
steadily drawing its arm further in  
and in, so the wet shoulder strains against the skin,  
the muscles reveal their smooth geometry  
beneath the mirror, the wave thickens,  
and then, as if drawing an arrow quick  
to the bowstring or finally pulling  
a resilient tuber from the shuddering earth,  
the sinews part and the foaming white bone  
emerges on the crest as the shoulder takes  
to its tense crescent.

It is here, on the jutting apex  
that the mussel makes its home.  
A brittle bone shell hunkered into sinking foundation,  
the mussel's gluey ooze gripping the rock face  
rough as rail spike iron beneath the blows  
of John Henry's hammer—his blood, these currents  
surging. But who is unbreakable?

Massive John Henry: his arms thick as bull necks,  
rippling as they fell the rock, curling and uncurling—  
then lying in the dry dust  
where steam hammers drum the ground—  
the black hands of his grandfather comes to mind—  
cries of “whup-whup” around the fire of mountainous body—  
and the coal trains keeping beat to Progression.

Or the tiny frail shell mussel:  
its byssal thread sewing into rock;  
the jagged quilt on lighthouse skirt  
that remains  
through cold wave, the ravages of seagulls,  
the sudden gyre, the lover's back—  
it remains  
not knowing  
that in laboratories it's being studied  
and new types of glue  
and sutures have been birthed from its prowess.

### Lobotomize the Sphinx

Dumbstab your riddles,  
your intellect, your  
clever as a cat  
with a fox in its mouth.  
Shave the fur from your breast,  
let your breasts jiggle  
naked and coldtaut,  
goosish of skin, nipples engorged,  
babebit as you trot  
around these boorish sons of Anak  
looking for the lover's bite.  
Forget the hunt,  
forget the blood,  
raise your cubs

in a shade glen girded  
by cat piss.  
The concept of suicide  
lost its way in a riddle:  
what's eager in the morning,  
rebuked in the afternoon,  
unknown in the evening?  
Icarus pruned his wings  
and weighted the stones  
of the Labyrinth  
to dust.

### When the farmer wakes

Cornfields cut in  
the morning mist  
the Sun  
is a baby

before her morning cry  
the pre-waking  
cry curling in the cock's mouth  
comb furred before  
the Sun

will spread fingers on  
the tablecloth  
cows groaning  
dew jewels  
the grass

of a dark rolling  
plain the side  
of a peaceful

Leviathan breathing

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Phil Rodenbeck is co-founder of the Art in Science and Technology (ArtiST) Conference and has served as editor-in-chief of the literary and arts journal *Ink*. He was the grand prize winner in the 2012 Max Ehrmann Poetry Competition.