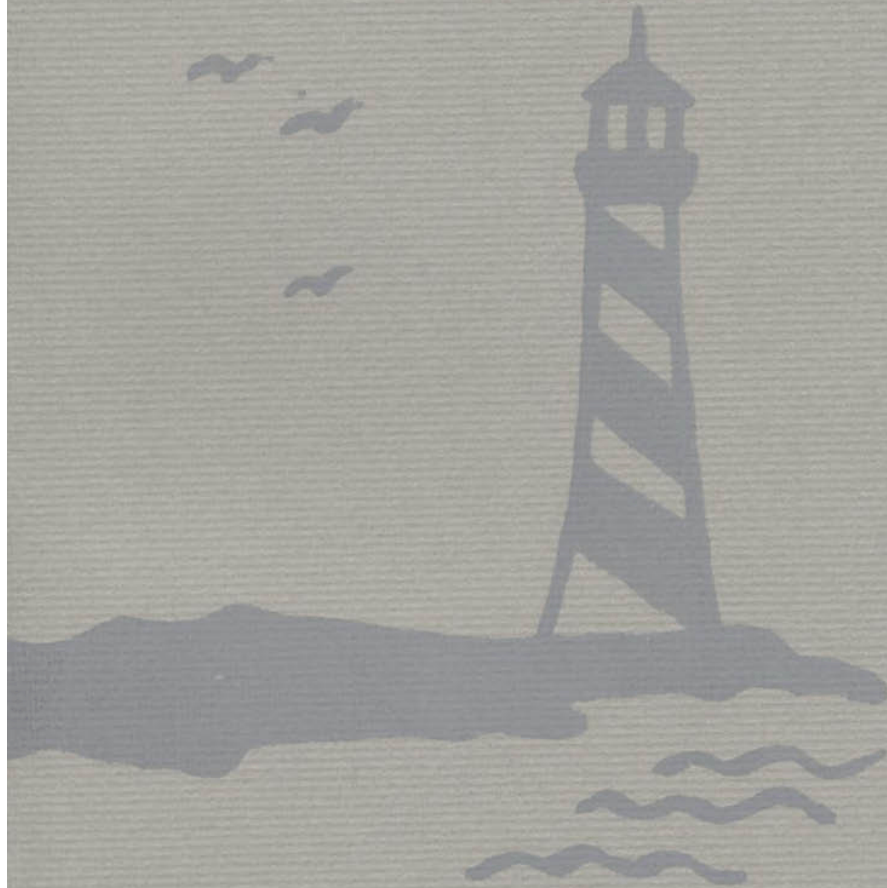


THE
LIGHTHOUSE
KEEPER



LARRY D. THOMAS

The Lighthouse Keeper

Larry D. Thomas

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DeKalb Literary Arts Journal: “Each Color”

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Poetry Depth Quarterly: “Of Beasts Become Angels”

RE:AL, The Journal of Liberal Arts: “As the Wind Blows”

*for Lisa,
my West Beach companion
and
my love*

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I. Above and Just a Few Feet Below

Shark's Tooth

It's shaped
like the sail
of a boat
lacerating

with its keel
the foam-strewn skin
of the Gulf.
For years

it has churned
in the surf
intact among bones
of the dead

staving off
but for a while
their pulverized
destiny

of beach sand.
It clanks
indestructible
against the armor

of ravenous crabs,
shredding the decades
with its deadly,
serrated edge.

Crabber

Ninety years of Galveston sun
reign in her flesh like a bronze tattoo
needled indelibly into her face,
arms, and legs. Her throat's adorned
with a choker of perfect sharks' teeth,
hard, imperturbable as her squinty gaze.
Daily, during the summer months,

she takes fresh chicken necks, yanks string
around them tight as tourniquets,
grabs net and bucket and prances
the few yards from her shanty to the surf.
With nothing but her sense of touch, she works
her stringed necks like a master, easing
the net under the bellies of greedy crabs

and shaking them violently
to the bottom of her bucket. As she waits
for the next strike, she fixes her gaze
on the sea, matching its brute indifference
with the iciness of her stare,
the crabs clacking in the bucket like dominoes
shuffled by the age-blotched hands of old men,

fueling her dream of dropping big blue males
into a bubbling stockpot flaring her nostrils
with crab-boil, reddening their blue
in but minutes, their sweet, white meat
but briefly satisfying to her appetite
as the seven feckless husbands
whose cremated bodies she's dumped into the sea.

Of Beasts Become Angels

Freed with the blade
of his pocketknife,
his gulls, skimmers, pelicans,

and great blue herons,
imprisoned for months
in the dark heart

of driftwood, take flight.
He feels the beauty of wings
in wind, of weightless bodies

keeling in the nacreous
liberty of dusk,
and after these moments

of beasts become angels,
braces for descension
to the earthbound,

hard wrought, and dauntless
independence of his chair
on wheels.

Undertow

The breeze from the southwest
is brisk, popping flags on the beach
like bullwhips. The Gulf is brown
with sand where a couple stands
in waist-deep sea, struggling to keep
feet stationary. The Gulf's
surface appears normal enough,

textured as it is with waves
swelling, breaking, and skittering foam
down their slopes like flung pebbles.
The man steadies his bulk
with the anchors of his curved toes.
The woman's crunching her panama
tight on her scalp with her left hand,

the right arm dangling at her side
her sole fulcrum for balance.
As a wave breaks she slips from his grip,
losing her footing to a violence
from the seabed to a foot or two above,
tumbling stingrays like tumbleweeds,
savage and unpredictable as her heartstrings.

Bad Since Birth

Crab-tough,
clad in a black
skull and crossbones

T-shirt, he adjusts
the black patch
square over his left eye

bad since birth,
and feeds more line
to the writhing shark

terrorizing children
with its shadow.
He reels it

this way and that,
keeping his line taut,
handling like a master,

all four fierce years of him,
his stinking new
shark-shaped kite.

Women in the Sun
(for Deena)

She spends her summers in the Galveston sun
oblivious of melanoma and the premature
leathering of the flesh. The deepening creases

of their brows sparkling with clear fat
bullets of sweat, the two elderly women
detour around her, smug under the straws

of new panamas. Each secretly envies
her fullness and suppleness of muscle,
her bronze flesh covered with nothing

but a film of baby oil, crackling like fat
in a vat of sizzling lard. With one foot
in the grave, they detour around her,

their faces of white raisins wincing
as they reminisce the pallid history
of their own flesh robbed of the sun

by bonnets and long cotton dresses.
They envy the brash recklessness
of her youth sprawling her body

in the hot Galveston sun for days
and days on end, charging for the ever
the stark white batteries of her bones.

Atlantic Coquinas

At the brink of eventide,
as the sea advances and then retreats,
exposing for a blink

the shell beds, they bubble by the hundreds
as if gasping for air, these half-inch clams
so abundant under our feet

it's as if the entire seabed
several feet deep consisted
of nothing but them, these little clams

so dazzlingly pastel
God must be busily grabbing rainbows
from the sky and crumbling them

to dribble at our feet, these little clams
propelling themselves for all they're worth
through their nacreous mud of stardust.

The Bathers
(After Bathers , c. 1918, by Pablo Picasso)

The Gulf
of molten jade
and whitecaps
is still frigid
with the cold
storage aspect

of winter.
The bathers
are freezing,
wading the hushed
desperation
of their bodies

in the surf,
locked
in the bloody
objects
of heads, trunks,
arms and legs

abject,
bone white,
godlike
in but the cold,
abstract eye
of the painter.

Shark-Eye Moon Snail

While above,
on the sea's obsidian surface
at midnight,
foam skitters over waves
like flat stones spun across a pond

from the curved thumbs and forefingers
of wide-eyed boys,
just a few feet below,
on the seabed,
tending the world's business

in the festive silence
of moonglow,
the moon snail labors
beneath its gorgeous shell
of spiraled elegance,

drilling neat holes through the shells
and rasping out the meat of clams,
its underside adorned
with the lidless, soulless eye
of the shark.

The Fisherman

He's barefoot, clad but with his black
swimming trunks. Weighted down with his net,
red bait box, black Phantom rod and his reel,
he backstrokes through the troughs to the last
sandbar, plants his feet solid as he can

on shifting sand, and catches what's left
of his breath. His treble hook glints
with first light. A black pouch wave-slaps
his belly, his sodden nylon depository
of weights, hooks, and a sharp fishing knife.

Deep into his bait box, he plunges
an open hand, dodging the poisonous spines
of live shrimp till he lands a big one,
pierces it just behind its eyes with a hook barb,
and he casts. In his dream of hammerheads

brushing his calves with the thick buffed leather
of their skin, he works his treble hook
like a master, casting his life of dice
again and again on the undulating,
foam-strewn crap table of his destiny.

II. Bestiary

Spanish Mackerel, Running

At first light, they propel their bluish,
opalescent bodies through the Gulf
like bullets gunpowder-blasted
through the barrels of high-powered rifles,
whipping back and forth
the thin crescent moons of their tails.

They strike and swallow whole
our spastic shrimp impaled on barbs
of treble hooks, bending double
our black Phantom rods,
unreeling our reels with god-
awful fury. With a single snap

of jaws teeming with a hell
of murderous teeth, they sever
the thick nylon of our line,
leaving it hookless, impotent,
flapping in the surf like a tiny,
fraying flag of surrender.

Wintered Out

By December, the old gull
has readied his body of bone,
a tad of muscle and feather,
as best he can, for the icy
blasts of blue Texas northers.
Even his head feathers,
having inconspicuously

assumed a grayish white aspect,
have paid their subtle
homage to the cold
as if some benevolent god
ripped a shred of winter sky
and grafted it seamlessly
to his skull. Come spring,

his hoary little heart
hardened by survival
to a marble of solid ice,
he'll strut, laugh like hell,
and tug over his head
the jet black hood
of the executioner.

Hardheads

By the hundreds,
the last several nights
at high tide,
they've washed ashore
and been bulldozed

before daybreak
to the dunes,
tainting the salty air
with the smell
of fresh fish rot.

They lie ghoulishly
prostrate in the hot sun,
their rubbery whiskers
crusted with sand,
their once slippery skin

sun-buffed to a mat gray.
Their mouths have dried
partially open
to a permanent sneer,
their lives so hardened

by the Gulf
that their dorsal spines,
even after death,
will puncture the plies
of new truck tires.

Brown Pelican

Of sticks of driftwood from God knows where,
rotting patches of shrimpers' nets,

bits of the sea-stained Styrofoam of old floats,
strands of mooring rope wrapping the down

of dead gulls and halves of dead crabs' pincers
and crumbling remnants of the corks

of voyaged bottles, she crafted her nest
where she ruffles her feathers and sits,

oblivious to the mites marching through her plumes
like battalions of a tiny Russian army,

the pliant webbing of her pouch
tucked under her bill like the countless chins

of a corpulent diva basking in the sun,
reveling in the fish-fragrant glory of her self.

Ghost Crab

The meat beneath its pale
yellowish carapace
but the substance
of spirit,
it lies perfectly still
inches below the mouth
of its hole.

But the devil's reach away,
at high tide,
black waves quake the beach
like the dropped barbells
of weight lifters.
To the drumbeat
of each wave,

the tiny psalm
of its body shudders
with nothing
to ward off the darkness
but the raised,
white pincers
of its prayer.

Cormorants

The water of the harbor is calm,
iridescent with diesel seeping
from the bilges of moored shrimp boats.
They glide through the sheen like stubby

black swans, vanishing suddenly
in deep dives to the harbor bed,
the undersea nothing to them
but a murky firmament

through which they rocket with the stretched
webbing of their feet, surfacing
with fish thrashing in the vises
of their hook-tipped bills, fish they swallow

whole, scales, spines, skeletons, fins and all,
leaving their black necks graceless,
turgid to the point of bursting,
shuddering pulse-like from the blood-

red bellows of desperate gills.

Stingray

In its firmament
of gray-green sea
where the light of a blue moon
glints on the unhinging

pincers of feasting crabs,
sparking the darkness
like distant stars,
it flaps its rubbery wings,

glides to the seabed,
flutters, and blends
its curved edges
with the sand. It lies

in the same spot where it lay
a year before
when a beachcomber
wandered barefoot in the surf,

forgot to shuffle his feet,
and stepped clumsily on its
flawlessly camouflaged wing,
taking deep into his shin bone,

shot by its whiplike tail,
its sharp, barbed dorsal spine
it took two nurses, a doctor,
and a scalpel to dig out.

Bull Ride

Splattering
the cobalt
firmament

like the glass
of priceless
gold and silver

ornaments
blasted
with a baseball

bat,
sunlight
ricochets

off bills
gale-buffed
to a brilliant

shine,
the bills of gulls
at high noon

riding
the torrid breath
of God.

Dolphin

Through the clear,
jade green Gulf
a dorsal slices

like the keel
of a catamaran.
Flukes flap

violently, propelling
a snaking spine
with the fluid motion

of the needle
a seamstress navigates
through the silk

of a queen's gown.
A carefree snout
leads the way,

rifling through
the bubbling green,
flawlessly created

both of light
to nuzzle the goose
pimpled skin of children

and of darkness
to pummel to its death
the ravenous shark.

Old Gull

It drags its broken wing like a bad divorce.
God only knows how it's lasted
so many weeks this way, the soar

far from its reach as requited love.
It survives by staying close
to the sea, the faithful webbing

of its feet all it can count on
to flee the grasp of feral cats.
The cruel winter wind

plasters its feathers to its breast,
twisting nearly off its dangling wing
scribbling on the beach

the undecipherable hieroglyphs
of its destiny, its glaucous eyes
unblinking, fixed on the rising tide

reaching toward it like a savior
to wash sparkingly clean
its agonizing slate of survival.

III. Beyond the Final Sandbar

In the Nacreous Hours
(September, 1900, Galveston, Texas)

before the Great Storm of 1900,
a calm breeze rustles palm fronds
like cotton castanets. The evening sky
is opalescent, disturbed by nothing

but the glides, swoops, and dives of gulls.
The children are nonchalant,
licking their bright red lollipops,
stuffing their mouths with sticky

pink wads of cotton candy.
The waves, grown mysteriously angry,
strike shell beds with the opening notes
of Beethoven's *Fifth*. The puppet limbs

of lovers are thrashing in the sky,
the cotton threads of their lifelines
twisting, fraying, held by but the screaming
of the brute, careening gulls.

Each Color

Ernest bows
in a fugue
of wave and gull

in the stained-glass shade
of catamarans.
Though they are beached

they still sing to him
of gust and wild dance.
He closes his eyes

in the sun,
and sees them
slicing seaward

with their men,
their man-made wings,
each color

a vivid,
momentary stay
against the ever.

"The Gull's Nest"
(name of travel trailer site, West Beach, Galveston)

The hoary palms
enclosing it
lean leeward,

shoved that way
by the bulldozer gales
of hurricanes.

Ever so close
to the Gulf it looms,
brandishing its decks

for bleaching
by the blistering fire
of sun, moon, and stars.

Near sundown
the wind dogs
prowl, howling,

dogs of raw salt
gnawing its metal
like fresh bones.

The Ferry

It's amazing how it even floats,
constructed as it is of steel,
concrete and macadam
and loaded to capacity

with dump trucks, eighteen wheelers,
and faded station wagons
creaking with the lineage
of three or more generations.

Gulls eager for a handout
swoop, dive and void at its stern
while the riders at its bow
keep turning their other

chapped, wind-puffed cheeks
to the lashes of cold salt spray.
Day in and day out it churns,
moving its riders from island

to peninsula, peninsula to island,
brooking their absurdities
for twenty or so minutes,
and then, like the lumbering,

nauseous whale of Jonah,
vomiting them up
to the stark, uncharted
beaches of their lives.

The Catch of His Dreams

The midnight ambience is gauzy,
underwater-like, suffused with moonglow
and the occasional glint of a distant star
clinging to the firmament like a barnacle

to the hull of a boat. Below the damaged
upper deck where I'm standing, the abandoned
travel trailer, hurricane-tumbled
to its final resting place, looms

like a *medusa* whose hair's a swarm
of slithering shadows, or the skull
of a drowned shrimper lost at sea, its paneless
windows his eye sockets through which shrimp

dart to the dark safety of a bony dome,
a drowned shrimper drifted gently down
to Davy Jones's locker, his weary mind
and the catch of his dreams forever one.

Mooring Line

Pearled with barnacles,
it lies half-buried in the dunes
like the necklace of a giant,
flung angrily to the ground.

Braided with thick,
blue and white strands of nylon,
its ends are frazzled
as an old maid's hair, scorched

from one too many permanents.
Its massive size belies its weakness,
its nylon long ago compromised
by sun and weeks on end at sea.

With nothing to show it mercy
but the laggardly deepening sand,
it'll lie this way for months,
sponging the screams and fleeting

shadows of the gulls,
tethering uselessness
to the slow, consuming pull
of ruin.

Driftwood

Whatever could possibly
have happened to it has,
this ossified leviathan
once the trunk of a great tree
bulldozed by storm tide to the surf
and knocked senseless to a shell bed,

its surface shorn of bark
and weathered to the texture
of sharkskin. The sun's bleached it
sans mercy to a dull gray
and the sea's cured its heart
with salt, leaving its underbelly

crusted with barnacles
even a screwdriver can't scrape off.
It lumbers in the garish light
of sun, blue moons, and stars,
this bench of grandest benches
itching for the buttocks of time.

As the Wind Blows

A great storm is building
in the darkness over the Gulf,
waking the elderly and wooing them
in nightclothes to the shoreline
where waves gobble sand
like the huge steel scoops of steam shovels.
The wind blows hard off the Gulf

stripping the elderly of their robes,
plastering loose flesh
against the warm brittle cages of ribs,
pulling back thin silver wisps of hair
like the hands of fierce Comanches
desperate for the scalps of the fallen.
As the wind blows hard off the Gulf,

the elderly keep rising from their beds
and easing seaward, filling old bodies
with the wild, invigorating blasts,
turning weary lungs into the breeze-
swelled canvases of catamarans,
slicing old bodies recklessly
through the dark and raging sea.

Beyond the Final Sandbar
(for Deena and Derek)

As we entered the Gulf, gulls above us
were laughing out loud as if guffawing,
our bodies so buoyant in liquid salt,

bobbing like corks in the deep ultramarine
green troughs between the sandbars
where we collected our breath in waist-deep sea

before plunging headlong into the next trough.
We could see beyond us the difference
in the hue and clarity of sea,

the line of demarcation on the outward
slope of the final sandbar
we foolishly kept driving toward,

risking cramps and close encounters
with creatures of nothing but muscle,
hunger, and row upon row of ever-

replenishing, serrated teeth,
awaiting us in the clearer, more deeply
hued depths of open ocean

we kept struggling to get to like wide-eyed,
gasping four-year olds catapulting
their vulnerable lives in darkness

to the climax of a horror tale.

The Lighthouse Keeper

It rises from the peninsula
like a black, rounded obelisk,
jutting through the fog, lifting but a memory
of its once bright light to sparkle

the distant, salt-stung eyes of tired seamen.
The local children swear on crossed hearts
that his ghost still haunts its dark interior,
tending the light, guiding gaunt mariners

he knows he'll never meet to the momentary
safety of the harbor. On moonless nights,
in their dreams, the children faintly see
the swaying lantern of his final trek

down the steep spiral staircase of his life
as he lumbers toward the ink black sea,
the children jerking in their sleep
to the thudding of his peg leg on each steel step,

knocking on the door of heaven.

Larry D. Thomas, who was born and reared in far West Texas, has resided in Houston, Texas, since 1967. Since his retirement in 1998 from the adult criminal justice system of Harris County, he has published seven collections of poems: *The Lighthouse Keeper* (Timberline Press, 2001); *Amazing Grace* (Texas Review Press, 2001); *The Woodlanders* (Pecan Grove Press, 2002); *Where Skulls Speak Wind* (Texas Review Press, 2004); *Stark Beauty* (Timberline Press, 2005); *With the Light of Apricots*, an online chapbook (Lily Press, 2007); and *Eros*, an online chapbook (*Slow Trains Literary Journal*, 2007). He has two additional collections currently in press: *The Fraternity of Oblivion* (Timberline Press, Fall 2007) and *New and Selected Poems* (TCU Press, Spring 2008). Among the major prizes and awards he has received for his poetry are the 2004 Violet Crown Award (Writers' League of Texas), 2003 Western Heritage Award (Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma), and two *Texas Review* Poetry Prizes (2004 and 2001). His poetry has also received nominations for the 2007 Poet's Prize (Nicholas Roerich Museum) and two Pushcart Prizes. On April 19, 2007, Mr. Thomas was appointed by the Texas Legislature as the 2008 Texas State Poet Laureate.