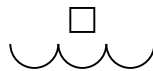


*The Scales
of
Astraea*

Poems
of
Earth, Its Creatures
&
The Old Gods

Djana Bayley



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Sample

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To the memory of
Thais Bayley Bock, 1918–2010

✠

Esther Ruth Carson, 1934–2016

Good friends,
passionate advocates of our earth
and all its creatures of land, water and sky.

You are sorely missed.

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Preface

The overarching theme of this book, expressed in each poem, is my love of this earth and the insects, birds, animals, plants and trees that exist on the planet with us. A parallel motif in many of the poems is my perception of the damage inflicted on earth and its creatures by the human race in our haste, ignorance and hubris, with a concomitant awareness of the cruelties – small and large, casual and technological – we are inflicting on the other species living here and to the very earth itself. The harm ‘mankind’ has imposed on our beautiful planet is immeasurable, the scale nearly incomprehensible – the consequences of our actions with regard to the earth’s intricate chain of life are only beginning to manifest.

From the time I was quite young, the myths of the Greek gods fascinated me, and all through my life their interwoven stories have continued to resonate, providing defined points of reference for occurrences in my own life. In certain strange ways – dare I say it? – The Old Gods have even influenced the manner in which I’ve lived and the roads I’ve taken through the years.

I am haunted as much today as when a child by those gods and scenes from their lives. To assist in the evocation of my themes, both as particularized symbols and for the potent images still accruing to them, certain of these Immortal Ones – sometimes in their Roman personae – make occasional appearances in the following pages.

I beg their gracious forgiveness for my temerity.

The pastel pencil illustrations were ‘drawn by D’ over the last two years specifically for this volume.

Djana Bayley, Lynnwood, July 2017

Astraea

In Greek legend, Astraea was considered the daughter of the Titans Astraeus, god of dusk, and Eos, goddess of dawn. When the gods departed earth at the end of the Golden Age, the Star Maiden continued to live among humankind through the Silver Age, a virgin goddess dedicated to upholding natural law, protecting the innocence of all living creatures and the purity of life-sustaining water and soil. In the Age of Bronze, man's increasing cruelty, greed and impiety at last drove her to abandon her earthly realm. On her return to heaven, the gods placed her among the stars as the constellation now known as Virgo; nearby are set her scales: Zygus in Greek, Libra in the Latin.

Depictions of Astraea portray her with a stern but majestic countenance, her head crowned with ears of grain; for its measure she carries in one hand a balance or scale, while in the other she holds a sword.

Note

Greek myth also related that Great Zeus and Themis, a Titaness who established the laws of religion, sacrifice and divination, were parents of Dike, a goddess closely associated – and often confused – with Astraea. Dike was the personification of just judgment regarding human laws, while Astraea always remained the guardian of earth's natural law. The Romans later made Dike their primary goddess of Justice – Justitia – giving her the function of upholding fair judgment among mortals and the keeping of social and political order by strict observance of rights established by custom and law. She was portrayed carrying a sword and scales – her blindfold did not become an attribute until the end of the 15th century.

See Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or Virgil's poetry for further details concerning these two goddesses.



Early Swallows

First I hear the twittering and run
outside, shading eyes against pale March
pellucidity, scanning space that has
seemed so empty – starlings, crows, jays, even
finches, chickadees hardly weigh in
like scale – but the sky remains empty and
I begin to doubt my ears (at nearly
two weeks late I fret about hurricanes,
poison sprayings), then again come those fine
electric cries, and this time I find
them – tiny dark scythe-wing specks scribing swift
circles and figure eights high in the cool
blue atmosphere – and day by day the skies
come alive with arrowing, darting swallows
interweaving aerial knots of joyous
arrival down, up, around familiar parks,
roofs, chimneys, trees – the gallant survivors
of that annual storm-tossed, perilous
odyssey from the fabled, farthest Argentine.

Midsummer Nightmare

The causeless fear that can shake
heart and rock bones flowered inside my blood

one warm jasmine-scented
June night at the velvet hem of thickest,

pre-dawn black with the barely
perceptible low, round hooting of a

Great Horned Owl declaring
sovereignty in a nearby alder wood.

Lifting me from dream, awake,
the vibration sounded again, closer,

raising hairs on my skin's edge –
instantly conjuring our dark hours

ancient, instinct-sharp terror
of the Presence approaching but unseen.

Votary of Dawn

The poplar stood on the upslope at street's end, ninety
years votary at veiled Aurora's daybreak altar . . .

now only a void – simple air – where once apricot-gold
diffused from sun lifting above the hill spilled

down tree's teardrop lineaments in a radiant
honey pour of light motes lumining every branch

and least twig to the glowing perfection found in
Books of Hours illuminations new-touched by

monks' sable brushes dipped in coruscating, gelid
gold – the hair-fine tips scattering, with precise,

caressing strokes, flames, darts, haloes, rays, sparks of
sun-gilt brilliance over stiff vellum pages.

.

Each year, April's unfolding yellow-suffused-lime
green leaves triumphed over morning's gold to create

a lacework, transparent scrim in shimmering,
mirror-back chartreuse . . . weeks later, summer-soft winds

stirred currents of ocean coolness through darkening
heart-shape leaves autumn transformed from jade to glowing

amber-topaze shades tossing in equinoctial
gales, the crisped leaf-flakes soon frost alchemized to burning,

brittle embers setting boughs alight, transfiguring
the tree a torch of rustling gold flame, quenched only when

winter's cold sun burnished creaking, naked branches
the rich tarnished gilt of antique picture frames.

.

The men with saws and machines that kill took a whole
day to reduce you to raw, ugly stump, then days
more to carve and cart your corpse away. Sky there now
barren, its air a bland blank, but I never look
to street's end without seeing your ghost tremble
in that space, bare slim branches swaying in spring
and winter winds, strong limbs rising, in-curved to
each other from your thick forked trunk and forming
a shape of steepled hands, tapered fingers placed
together, praying. We never listen.

Jupiter's Herald

Smoke gray kitten – white mustache, cravat, mittens –
scampers down brick walk in storm portending wind
piling blue-black cumulus over jagged range
of cobalt and alabaster peaks . . . atmosphere

currents shifting, the airy towers begin to
disintegrate, western gusts sending clouds fleeing so
swiftly forward the scudding vapors transform
into streaming plumes that mimic some giant corvid

escaped from ancient myth, while ivory-white snow slopes,
gold-gilt hill and ridge forests, shield-polished silver sound
change from sunlight to shade beneath the great racing
raven-cloud wings. The kitten – ash soft fur ruffling

to thistle puffs, straight up short tail pluming twice size,
eyes all pupil – suddenly pounces where rustle
shivering along dry grass stalks betrays rushing
passage of an outrider zephyr – elusive

herald of the mighty Thunder God's darkling approach.