



# ODD FISH

20 poems about  
Constantine Samuel Rafinesque

G. E. Schwartz

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# ODD FISH

*Argument:*

In the autumn of 1840 Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, the Sicilian-American naturalist, died in a lonely garret on lower Race Street, Philadelphia. Except for books, manuscripts, and cabinets of botanical specimens, he left no worldly goods. He had summoned no one to attend him in his last illness. He was buried in an unmarked grave. Yet this man was the author of a score of works on ichthyology and botany, and the list of his contributions to the periodical literature of his day includes hundreds of items. Open any manual of botany or ichthyology, and here and there "*Raf.*" still stands beside some genus or species which he first found and classified.

## 1. Traveller

“What an odd looking fellow!” Great Audubon said to himself, observing a man landing from a boat, with what looked like dried clover on his back; “How the boatsman stare at him! Sure he must be an original!” Ascending with rapid step, approaching me, asking if I could point out the house in which Mr. AUDUBON resided. “Why I’m the man, and will gladly lead you to my dwelling.”

The traveler rubbed his hands together with delight, and drawing a letter from his pocket, handed it to me without any remark. Breaking the seal I read as follows:

*My dear Audubon, I sent you an odd fish, which you may prove to be undescribed, and hope you will do so in your next letter. Believe me always your friend B.”*

With the simplicity of a woodsman, I asked the bearer where the odd fish was, he smiled, rubbed his hands, and with the greatest of humor said, I am that odd fish I presume, Mr. Audubon.” Confounded, blushing, I contrived to stammer an apology.

Now I, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, lay here, corroding on Race Street,—broken desk, torn curtains, dying beside the utter rot of my collection, my life’s collections, while John James, is back from England and France, selling birds as if they were sacred for gold.

Jean Audubon, how new, recent before me still, there singing to the Ohio:

*“Clear cut the boards of yellow poplar to lay my homestead’s foundation deeper than the river. If need be I’ll cut all of Kentucky into meek farmland. Grind the flour of life and feed ourselves off this nation.”*

Audubon—born to astonish! “River-God!” I called him when we met that day. He called me “*Odd Fish*”. Perhaps I looked

more than odd then: hair of great length, eyes  
tired, tense upon the trail of species up and down  
Kentucky, my cheeks all ruddy red, brown.

I lodged with him three weeks, three weeks of  
fellowship, I tell you: Ninety-two flowering plants,  
before unknown to men, twelve fishes, a great fossil-bone,  
a new bat      unrecoverable days,  
*Each day an ignition! Pure creation!* Heaven  
rendered as if for mortals! And all the while  
Great Audubon was drawing: I saw him  
draw a goose—*Life size!* Then only  
to burn it, crying out: “This is too stiff—  
I need a dozen lives to learn!” He  
vowed then to *render* every bird of America!  
Great Audubon—eternally blessed!

~~~~~

*at first in that place above the earth*

## 2. *Beginnings*

Base-born, not even able to make  
a decent living, was on myself,  
Constantine Samuel, and my  
desire—what are we but our

*desire?*

Sicily was my rookery,  
and when I was of age and mastered  
Sicilian, Greek and English—  
writing them all as equally as well,  
I took a position as a consulate interpreter,  
then, investing my meager savings at strong rate,  
I turned money to my one devotion:  
as a means of knowledge: animate things:  
their categories, their gills, their scales, their diet,  
their size, their length, their songs, their wings,  
their leaf, their flower, their fruit—  
all the seasons, tides and truths. I knew  
God to be science and begged to be its scribe!

~~~~~

*on the earth (was)    an extended fog    and there  
the great Manito was*





I was asunder, sucked like all of perdition's pull,  
then beaten, crumpled onto a beach! There,  
staggering in backwash, lost in sargassum weeds.  
And I screamed: "Foam-heads, stifle  
your thunder drum! More naked  
than brave Ulysses, I have come  
to this new begotten land. And I take  
all the shame you chose to show me!  
Strip me, crush me! But never  
shall you claim all! Rafinesgue here bows  
upon this coarse stretch of sand, and to America  
offers up mind and strength, raise me  
as I raise your secrets, America! ***Down then, down  
then...beat the ground, eyes averted, region unbound!  
Shout you beautiful spirits, I'm bound  
for Indian Summer with the teal and the tern;  
All the fish, pike and sturgeon, follow  
me spinning their silver wheels; I  
hear them rumble great fish underneath  
our keels! And my sleep will be  
a great horned owl: I see him float before me!  
This is my first morning: I hear a chorus  
of southing birds who never soar away from spring!  
I will navigate the channels of God who is Science!***

You see...  
a shipwrecked wretch *is anybody's guest...*

~~~~~  
*at first forever        lost in space    everywhere  
the great Manito was*

#### *4. Saw Eastward*

Saw Eastward and over cypress swamps,  
that dawn, redder than raw meat,  
break; and the large bird, long  
neck out thrust, wings crooked  
to scull air, moved in slow *calligraphy*,  
crank, flat and black against the color  
of God's blood spilled, as though  
pulled by a string. Saw  
it advance across the flamed  
distance.

Moccasins set in hoarfrost, eyes  
fixed on the bird—yes, on that sky  
it is black, yes, in my mind it is  
heron—the great one. Dawn,  
my heart shaking in the tension  
of this world—**Dawn**—and  
what is your desire?

~~~~~  
*he made the extended land and sky*

## 5. *Dream*

Shank end of the day, spit of snow,  
the call, a crow, sweet in the distance,  
then sudden in the clearing:  
among stumps, ruined cornstalks, yet  
standing, the spot like a wound rubbed raw,  
in the vast pelt of the forest—  
there is a cabin, a huddle of logs,  
with no calculation or craft:  
human filth, human hope. Smoke,  
from the mud and stick chimney,  
in *that* air, greasily brims, cannot  
lift, bellies the ridge pole, unravels  
whit, thin, down the shakes like sputum.

I stand, lean on my gun, stare  
at the smoke, thinking: "***Punk-wood***",  
thinking "***deadfall, half rotten***". Too  
slothful, that is, to even set ax  
to clean wood. My foot on the trod  
mire by the door, crackles night-ice  
already forming there. My hand  
lifts, hangs. In imagination, my  
nostrils already know the stench  
of that lair beyond the door jams.  
The dog presses his thick head  
against my knee. My hands strike  
wood. No answer. I ***hello***. Then  
the voice. What should I recognize?  
The nameless face in the dream  
of some pre-dawn cock-crow—  
about to say what, do what?

The dregs  
of all nightmares are the same,  
and we call it ***life***. I know  
that much, being a man, and know  
***that the dregs of all life are nightmares.***  
Unless. Unless what? There is no unless.  
I learned that when first I came here,  
all possessions lost...books, manuscripts,  
specimens...off Long Island Sound...  
shipwrecked so close to American then  
dashed...

The face, in the air, hangs. Large

raw-hewn, strong-beaked, a haired mole  
near the nose, to the left, and  
the left side by the firelight glazed red,  
the right in shadow, and under  
the tumble, the tangle of dark hair  
on that head, and under coarse eyebrows,  
the eyes, dark, glint as from unspecifiable  
darknesses of a cave. This is a woman.  
She is tall, taller than me. Against  
a gray skirt, her hands hang. *“Ye  
wants to spend the night? Kin ye pay?  
Well, mought as well stay then, done  
got one a-ready, and leastwise, ye  
don’t stink like no Injun.”*

The Indian, hunched by the hearth, lifts  
his head, looks up, but from one eye only.  
The other, an aperture below which  
blood and mucus hung, thickening slow.  
*“Yeah, a arrow jounced back off his bowstring—  
durnd fool...and him an Injun.”* She laughs.  
The Indian’s head sinks. So I turn,  
drops my pack in a corner on a bearskin,  
propping the gun there. Came back to the fire.  
Took out my watch. Drew it bright,  
on the thong-loop, from under my  
hunter’s frock. It was gold, lived  
in my hand in that firelight, and  
the woman’s hand reached out. She  
wanted it. She took it, hung it around  
her neck, near it the great hands hovered  
delicately, as though it might fall, they  
quivered like moth-wings, her eyes  
were fixed downward, as though in shyness,  
on *that* gleam, and her face was sweet  
in an outrage of sweetness, so that  
my gut twisted cold. I could not  
bear what I saw: her body swayed  
like a willow in a spring wind. Like  
*a girl*. The time came to take back  
the watch. I took it. And as she,  
sullen, sunken, fixed the food, I  
became aware that the Indian’s live eye  
was secretly on me, and soundlessly lips  
move, and when her back is turned,  
the Indian drew a finger, in delicious

retardation, across his throat

After food, and scraps for my dog, I  
laid down: in the corner, on bearskins,  
which were not well cured, and stink,  
the gun at my side, primed, cocked.  
Under my hand I felt the dog breathing.  
The woman hulked by the fire. I heard  
a jug slosh. Then dream: saw the Indian,  
and felt the splendor of *God*.

~~~~~  
*he made the sun      the moon      the stars*

## 6 . *A Dream Ending*

I think: “*Now.*” And know I have  
entered the dark hovel in the forest  
where trees have eyes, know it is  
the tale they told me when I was a child,  
know it is the dream I had in childhood,  
but never knew the end of, only the scream.

But the scream now, and under my hand  
the dog lies taut, waiting. And I, too,  
know what it is I must do, do soon, and  
therefore do not understand why  
now a lassitude sweetens my limbs,  
or why, even in the moment of fear—  
or is it fear? —the saliva in my  
mouth tastes sweat. “*Now, now!*” the voice  
in my head cries out, but everything  
seems far away, and small, distant.  
I cannot think what guilt unmans me,  
or why I should find punishment  
so precious. It is too late. ***This world!***  
I will name the world onto itself.  
Is there any end that ends on a dream  
ending?

~~~~~  
***he made them all to move evenly***

## 7. *Walk*

I never knew what I had lost, what  
I had found. I was only myself,  
and that promise. Continue to  
walk the world. And love it.  
I continued to walk the world.

~~~~~

*then the wind blew violently and it cleared  
and the water flowed far off and strong*



**8. Blessedness**

My life, at the end, even in anguish,  
seemed simple. Simple, at least, in  
that it had to be, simply, what  
it was, as I was, in the end,  
myself and not what I had known  
I ought to be. ***The blessedness—!***  
To wake in some dawn and see,  
as though down a rifle-barrel, lined  
up like sights, the self that was,  
the self that is, and there, far off,  
but in range, completing that alignment,  
my fate. Hold my breath, let  
the trigger-squeeze be slow, steady.  
The quarry lifts, in a halo of golden leaves,  
its noble head. *This is time*

***undimensioned!***

In this season the waters shrink. Springs  
are circular, surrounded by yellow  
leaves, which are fallen from the beech trees.

Not even a skitter-bug disturbs  
the gloss of the surface tension. Sky  
is reflected below—absolute clarity.

Nothing disturbs the infinite.

~~~~~

***and groups of islands grew newly and there remained***

**9. Distill**

Became an international trader, dealing  
in medicinal plants and herbs, distilled  
brandy, without tasting a drop of it,  
hating all strong liquors, and at night  
nuzzle the dark Sicilian Josephine,  
fathered two children—a daughter, Emily,  
and a son who died in infancy—when  
Josephine found the caresses of another,  
a strolling actor, when she thought me penniless,  
I abandoned all, packed 50 cases of scientific specimens  
and paraphernalia, setting sail for America.

((Of my time in Sicily, only this: the island  
offered fruitful soil, delightful climate,  
perfidious men, deceitful women.))

*I loved no man or woman...*

~~~~~  
*anew spoke the great Manito a manito to manitos*

**10. Link**

*Link all languages:*  
Make a tabular view  
of the compared Atlantic  
**ALPHABETS & GLYPHS**  
of Africa and America

**LIBYAN**

*1. Primitive and Acrostic.*  
*2. Old Demotic or Tuaric.*  
Meanings and Names  
of Letters in No. 1.

**AMERICAN**

*3. Letters of Otolum.*  
*4. Glyphs of Otolum.*  
Names of  
Letters in No. 2.

|                 |       |        |
|-----------------|-------|--------|
| Ear.....AIPS    | A     |        |
| Eye.....ESH     | EI    |        |
| Nose...IFR      | IZ    |        |
| Tongue..OMBR    |       | OW     |
| Hand...VULD     | UW    |        |
| SEA.....MAH     | IM    |        |
| Earth....LAMB   |       | IL     |
| Air.....NISP    | IN    |        |
| Fire.....RASH   | IR    |        |
| Sun.....BAP     | IB    |        |
| Moon...CEK      | UK    |        |
| Mars....DOR     | ID.ET |        |
| Mercury...GOREG | IGH   |        |
| Venus....UAF    | UW    |        |
| Saturn...SIASH  |       | ES.ISH |
| Jupiter...THEUE |       | UZ     |

~~~~~  
*to beings      mortals      souls and all*

**11. Devil-Jack Diamond**

A remarkable local fish—  
Audubon showed me colorful sketches—  
***the Devil-Jack Diamond***—  
existing only in Audubon's mind, in  
his imagination

but solemn told me:  
***this species reaches a length of ten feet,  
covered with scales so hard  
that a man could start a fire  
by striking them with steel!***

I, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque,  
take careful notes, include years later  
in my book on fishes of the Ohio  
***the Devil-Jack Diamond***,  
scientifically christen it

***Litholepsis Adamantinus—!***

After weeks of amusement,  
I abruptly depart  
without so much as a by-your-leave  
for Audubon..  
Ahead, the Mississippi, downstream.

~~~~~

***and ever after he was a manito to men—their grandfather***

**12. Lists**

Crabs. Shells. Water plants.  
Soil. Swamps. Sand. Downs. Marls.  
Islands. Strata. Fossils.

The natural history  
establishment: Bartrams, Peales, Rushes,  
Michauxs: ***half-taught school-boys all!***

When, finally, I settle in Philadelphia, I calculate  
I found about 25 species of bats, rats  
and other quadrupeds, about 20  
new species of birds, about 15 new  
species of snakes, turtles, lizards  
and other reptiles, 64 new species of  
fishes of the Ohio, more than 80  
new species of shells, besides some  
new worms and many fossils. And  
in Botany I have collected more  
than 600 new species of plants  
of which one tenth part at least  
are new.\*

*\*totals inflated by  
the Devil-Jack Diamond and  
several others Audubon playfully sketched...  
...and I accepted as real.*

~~~~~  
***he gave the fish      he gave the turtles    he gave the  
beasts            he gave the birds***

### *13. Patents*

Held patents on:

- a steam plow (never manufactured);
- an artillery piece of which a single discharge will destroy one thousand men... one mile off or sink a large ship of war (the Mexican government continues to show no interest)
- *Pulmel*, an elixir sold as a cure for tuberculosis— I take it myself, believe in its curative powers.

~~~~~

*he made the flies      he made the gnats*

**14. Income**

Income for the year 1832.....\$363.87, mostly  
from the sale of Pulmel.

Spent.....\$92.80 on travel  
.....\$98.15 on food & domestic sundries  
.....\$190.72 on my publishing ventures\*

*\*upwards of one thousand, self-published  
in editions of one hundred or less  
on the cheapest paper*

~~~~~

***truly this manito was active and kindly***





## 16. Listen

*Listen:* Stand very still and  
far off, where shadow  
is undappled you may hear  
the agitated boar  
grumble in his ivy-slick.  
Afterward, there is silence until  
the jay, quick as consciousness, calls.  
The call, in abundant sunlight, is like  
the thrill of the taste of—  
on the tongue—*brass*.

*listen* bogs of fennel and morel  
for a new tongue able to perform  
the role of revelation! *Listen:*  
a swarm of insects in Crystal, every nation  
that breeds or ever bred in hoary woods;  
chartreuse katydids as luxuriant as quahogs;  
roaches beaked like swallows;  
huge, holy crickets arched to play quadrilles;  
luminescent saltine crocodiles  
seducing sulfur moths in the deep blue hour;  
caddis-flies crazed for a moment's spawn;  
king crabs parturient past Whitman's multitudes;  
diatoms amber among minnows in black lagoons;  
This is my great wave of interstellar sleep:  
engulf me, enfold me, take me  
further and further always further, more.

And I now know the present sun  
that gave colder range to river-valley  
driving dinosaurs into the warm blood of mastodons...

And I now know the planets of plants:  
water-starwort and fern-leafed palms;  
and beyond the fire-pink of salamanders  
and moss-gold tortoises, beyond dank hedges  
of osage and sassafras, we are wondrously doomed  
and stippled in embroidery or speech  
claiming nothing and everything!

World as word declares itself—  
a voice is vaulted in, arch on arch,  
redundancy of joy, its end  
is its beginning, necessity



**18. Race Street**

So on Race Street I die in my bed. Stomach Cancer.  
Alone. Broke. The landlord  
taking my books and collections  
in lieu of back rent—  
even tried to sell my body  
to the medical school—  
staved off only by those  
who intervened so that I  
could have a private, marked grave.

Neither death nor oblivion is mine  
to requisition! Shames and discomfitures  
pursued my best resolves, for here  
I burned a passion, learning tiny truths  
of the most unseen. Here,  
white-polled in the abyss, already  
I'm stiffening to stone, consigned to dust,  
contorted deep down into flint—  
but as you god as science strip from me  
all curiosity, please let me drink again  
the vintage of a living tree, listen

to a Carolina wren.

~~~~~

***but very secretly an evil being      a mighty magician  
came to earth***

**19. Legacy**

Here is a legacy for Superior minds:

- Put into practice my plans for

Steam Plowing

Noncombustible Houses

Cooperative Libraries Unions of Working Men.

Homes for Orphaned Girls.

And those that follow me

should make every effort

to organize

**“Societies of Happiness”.**

~~~~~  
*and with him brought badness  
brought bad weather sickness*

*quarreling  
death*

*unhappiness*

**20. *Odd Fish***

Name a species, an odd fish.  
In this century, and moment of mania,  
name a species, an odd fish.  
Make it a fish  
that can transverse great waters,  
heavens, starlight, a fish that can swim it all.  
The name of the species  
    will be *ODD FISH*  
but don't call it by its name...  
Name a species, give me happiness.

~~~~~  
*all of this took place of old on the earth  
beyond the great tide-water           at the first*