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Ned Balbo

Featured Maryland Writers

Ned Balbo’s books include *The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots* (New Criterion Poetry Prize) and *3 Nights of the Perseids* (Richard Wilbur Award), both published in 2019. *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* received the Poets’ Prize and the Donald Justice Prize. His poem “The Wolves of Chernobyl” was second-prize co-winner in the 2022 Keats-Shelley competition sponsored by the UK’s Keats-Shelley Memorial Association. Awarded a 2022 Maryland State Arts Council Independent Artist Award in poetry, Balbo has taught for Iowa State University’s MFA program in creative writing and environment, the West Chester University Poetry Conference, and Loyola University Maryland. A native of Suffolk County, Long Island, he is married to poet and essayist Jane Satterfield and lives in Baltimore. (For more, visit <https://nedbalbo.com>.)

Ultraviolet Chimera

“‘Ultraviolet Chimera’ was torn from the headlines—specifically, the one used for the poem’s epigraph. From there I googled photos and more, disappointed to find that the ultraviolet pelts captured on camera were always those of deceased platypuses. The poor things: I’d hoped to see them as glowing and alive. I started thinking about deep time and the strange forces that shaped this creature born of such seemingly contradictory lineages and habits. I wrote the poem in 2021 during a stay at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts as a Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation Creative Fellow. *Postscript*: Around the same time, I was shopping around for a watery creature I could use for an ‘I Am the Walrus’ (Beatles)/ ‘Porpoise Song’ (Monkees) homage I had in mind. The platypus was perfect. This psychedelic science fiction fantasy of a song has little to do with the poem besides beast and title, but anyone interested can stream for free at Bandcamp under ‘ned’s demos’: neddemos.bandcamp.com/track/ultraviolet-chimera. ”

Ultraviolet Chimera

“Platypuses Glow Under Black Light. We Have No Idea Why”

— Cara Giaimo (*New York Times*, November 13, 2020)

In your genome lies the secret
of your offshoot origin,
the genetic trail that tracked you
when your path & ours diverged—
Hybrid hoax with reptile habits,
though a mammal, more or less—
Jurassic fugitive, descendant
of the Mesozoic mess,

did carnosaurus & theropods
hunt you among the horsetails?
Did you bask in ginkgo-shade
then dive away when danger neared?
Otter-furred & waterproof,
defender of opposed positions,
with a foothold in the future
& a passport to the past—

Are you a mammal? I’m not sure—
You brood upon the eggs you lay
but feed your young with mother’s milk:
oddest merging of fur & scale.
But how much stranger is it
when you paddle, duckbill first,
hunting down the moving target
of a shrimp’s electric field?

—Now we’re told you even glow
when bathed in ultraviolet light,
an aquatic aquamarine invisible
to human vision . . . Good camouflage,
perhaps, from predators
stalking that hidden spectrum,
or maybe some ancestral quirk
our lucky forerunners once shared?

I like to think that’s it: that all
our forebears glowed blue-green,
fluorescent in primordial wetlands
among dragonflies & ferns,
our distant kin a heady hodgepodge
that defies taxonomy, the UV
light against their fur kindling
more beauty than we knew.