ODD FISH

20 poems about
Constantine Samuel Rafinesque

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Argotist Ebooks
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!

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*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!

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on the earth (was) an extended fog and there
the great Manito was
3. Wreck

Sailing for New York City,
on the good brig, Hosea Jackson, the captain—
the good Captain Hearn. Gull-wings
streaming down the wake of the stern,
sails in full wind, fanning in the august east wind.
Rounding Cape Pellegrino
for the Gates of Hercules and the United States:
a journey meant no more than three months.
Then the sky lit its blood crucible,
burning the very corpse of Sicily.
and I—among the living, vowing
never to return.
Fifty chests and boxes safely laid in hold,
shanties of Yankee Tars filling the days,
along with the music of topsails, sheets, spars.
I’d heard of others bound hellward: to Africa,
to Guinea—there to stalk leviathan,
cure skins, mount birds, press plants...
but I...I would set merely to name them all!

Then! In sight of Montauk a squall,
tumbling us to beam-ends That Wall Of Wave!
CRACK! Taking both masts before we righted!—
then, there, naked, shivering, rudder-racked,
league upon tossed league of calenture
nearing Fisher’s Island, then Race Rock
The Second of November near Midnight—
storm with a meteor’s head, splintered the rudder
in a boil of sea, then with a brash curvet
the brig tilted, ripped with roars of “Race Rocks! Race Rocks!
Everyone to the boats! To the boats!”

Her keel to flotsam, she ground, floating
down the sound, filling

With my manuscripts, my toil
of years—trunk and trunk of matchless specimens!
My books! Clothes, gold! New World
without mercy! New World naked! New World
cold!

As bowlder-ax split keel and kelson, all ribs
unseamed, and a black sailor by me swore, screamed,
but did not follow me upon the spine
of a shoal-stricken beast maul
of a breaker, seizing with a million chills:
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...

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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?

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*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,  
alld 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 unspecified
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 bear skins, 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.

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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?

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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.

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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.

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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...*

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*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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIBYAN</th>
<th>AMERICAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Primitive and Acrostic.</td>
<td>3. Letters of Otolum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Old Demotic or Tuaric.</td>
<td>4. Glyphs of Otolum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanings and Names of Letters in No. 1.</td>
<td>Names of Letters in No. 2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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to beings  mortals  souls and all

19
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.

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and ever after he was a manito to men—their grandfather
12. Lists

Crabs. Shells. Water plants.
Islands. Strata. Fossils.

The natural history
establishment: Bartrams, Peales, Rushes,
Michauxs: \textit{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.*

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

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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.

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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

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truly this manito was active and kindly
15. Instability

THE WORLD (or INSTABILITY)
a 5,400 line epic poem:
STARS. LIGHT. ANGELS. DEVILS.
PEACE. PASSION. WAR. WOMEN.

and then:
Species and perhaps Genera also, are
forming in organized beings by
gradual deviations of shapes, forms,
and organs...this is part
of the great universal law, this
perpetual mutability.

Evolution! 1833!
In endless shapes, mutations
quick or slow, the world revolves,
and all above, below, in various
molds and frames all things
were cast,
but none forever can
endure or last.

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to those very first men fetched them wives
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
blooms like a rose. Therefore, is truth the only thing that cannot be spoken? It can only be enacted, and that in dream, or in the dream become, as though unconsciously, action, and I stood at dusk, in the path leading to the raw settlement, and saw the first lamp lit behind a window, and did not know What I was.

I did not know my own name. I walked in the world. I was sometimes prone to stand in perfect stillness, when no leaf stirred. *Tell me, dear God—tell me the sign whereby I may know the time has come.*

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*he had cheerful knowledge all thought in gladness*
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.

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*but very secretly an evil being*     *a mighty magician*

*came to earth*
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”.

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and with him brought badness    quarrelings    unhappiness
brought bad weather   sickness    death
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.

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