

ERIC GREENWELL

THE PROBLEM WITH TALKING ABOUT WISDOM

"The poem was in danger of being read as a tract, of being viewed as a walk toward a destination." —Hazard Adams, on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opinion of John Keats's opinion of Coleridge's poem, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

The problem with talking about Wisdom is sometimes people don't know as he knows Wisdom is an albatross, honest-to-god flesh-and-hollow-bone the oldest confirmed living wild bird in the world, which nests at an atoll equidistant from North America and Asia practically named Midway, so he's convinced he's talking about Wisdom as an attendant's convinced he's waxing poetic about wisdom for some reason, at the Chevron off exit 68 in Hood River, Oregon, this unlikely meeting occasioned by a law that people in said state can't, in good standing, pump their own gas, which they, as Oregonians—one transplanted from Indianapolis while the other is native, but not in the indigenous sense—have grown tired of making small talk under as numbers across cost and gallon gauges rise and rise and, partly, why he rattles off his facts about Wisdom, unaware, conversely, the attendant's enamored with the simple yet profound way he talks of virtues, so that when the man says, "Wisdom has flown over 3 million miles," they are both in awe, but for different reasons—the man because that distance is exhausting, the attendant because he thinks the man says wisdom has been everywhere, or *is versed*, he'd say, if he had the word—and that thought of wisdom's *versedness* is so vast and fitting the attendant lets a wet squeegee he guides down the windshield skip, leaving starbursts of guts and moth parts, and it gets even worse as the man says, "Wisdom has laid 37 eggs

in her lifetime," because what a weird number, 37, 37 suddenly resurrected from his brain like his father's naked body, hairy and sagging and repressed, and when was there ever 37 anything — chess pieces, bottle rockets, Erector sets, commandments or grievances, the dead or the pillaged — and so what are they, these 37 Eggs of Wisdom, he asks, "Grace or Will or Faith?" and the man, who's somewhat taken aback, only having skimmed the longish article about Wisdom in yesterday's Apple Newsfeed, who's afraid the attendant may have read it also, in its entirety, and could know something he doesn't, who doesn't understand the reason this middleman in their godforsaken state must perform a monkey's function of moving a nozzle four feet to his left and then pulling the trigger, says, "You can call them whatever you want, son. Birds don't care about names," and for a while, after that man pulls away, after the sanctimonious pop and topping him off, the attendant is tired, as if he came a long way to that place he was certain would be there, facing doom without memory, and turning back, and though the attendant can't say it, he feels the gap between *confusion* and *Confucian* lies, mostly, in subtle tongues, and now I've spoken for him, and later, when the shift manager asks someone to scrape a smattered wet sack from the parking lot, which they hope isn't a diaper or some deadbeat's sour milk, this all wells up, all this talk of Wisdom, and he looks at her square in her face and asks, "Do you ever think the pumps look like robots, built to put hands in your pockets?" and as she sits there, baffled, he throws down his orange vest, proclaiming, "Guess what! Birds don't care about names!"