

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Phillips
- poems -

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Robert Phillips (born 1938) is an American poet and professor of English at the University of Houston. He is the author or editor of more than 30 volumes of poetry, fiction, poetry criticism and other works. In 1998 he was named a John and Rebecca Moores Scholar at the university.

The Panic Bird

just flew inside my chest. Some
days it lights inside my brain,
but today it's in my bonehouse,
rattling ribs like a birdcage.

If I saw it coming, I'd fend it
off with machete or baseball bat.
Or grab its scrawny hackled neck,
wring it like a wet dishrag.

But it approaches from behind.
Too late I sense it at my back --
carrion, garbage, excrement.
Once inside me it preens, roosts,

vulture on a public utility pole.
Next it flaps, it cries, it glares,
it rages, it struts, it thrusts
its clacking beak into my liver,

my guts, my heart, rips off strips.
I fill with black blood, black bile.
This may last minutes or days.
Then it lifts sickle-shaped wings,

rises, is gone, leaving a residue --
foul breath, droppings, molted midnight
feathers. And life continues.
And then I'm prey to panic again.

Robert Phillips