

**Selections from Elusive Beasts, A Life-in-Poems of Proto-Paleontologist Mary
Anning
MAGPIE MILLER**

A note on the poems: This selection comes from *Elusive Beasts*, a life-in-poems of proto-paleontologist Mary Anning (1799-1847) of Lyme Regis, England. Chronically impoverished, Anning persisted in digging up and selling fossils to the wealthy collectors, academics, and tourists who visited the shop she ran with her mother, Molly Anning. In 2022, a statue of Anning and her dog, Tray, was erected in Lyme Regis, a belated honor to one of England's most significant self-taught scientists.

Miss Philpot, You Ask Did I Wish Once

for daughters? Not for me, a coddled, blood-tied brood. But this: sisters a-chime

in chisel-song. Girls gathered

in the coven of diggers, gossip-givers, scattered school

of letter-writers. Picture such women as are we – long threads loosed

from the same bright spool. Let my ladies be no ladies.

Rather: outrageous outcrop

of female curiosity. Strange animals in glorious league: skirt-clad,

boot-heeled tribe. Adepts in pick-axe audacity!

Witness this, our legion: shovel-wed rucksack rebels. With fists

we strike our adamant claim.

O, consider us keepers of age and auger, maidens who wield

the musical hammer, chip chert, and offer counsel

in the urgent cause of rock! How fortunate we found

ourselves, for fully-formed we sprang

from the sorority of stone: fossilist-females. Our courage all our own!

By Lamplight Miss Anning Answers Her Curious Mother

An accurate and rigorous knowledge of zoology is requisite in anyone who ventures on the subject; a superficial acquaintance with it can only lead into confusion and error.

-- Mary Anning

Mum, when I lift back the skin-shroud, take up the slime of organs,
I search.

Not for the secret to turn from my appointed mortality, nor for an elixir to tighten
my frame into the form of a man and his muscle.

It's the common life and its mechanisms I seek. How the living creature can persist
without motor, without the engine of a sun

burning energy in its dark parts. Within the walled animal, blood churns through vessel
and chamber. Thoughts scamper atop

one another in the vast, convoluted rafters of the mind. What soft parts might be guessed at,
might have been tangled once, in the frames

of my rock-bound children, in the mineralized skeletons that writhe and cinch in their stasis?
I find reason for compassion in the stink

of glossy innards, the festering ruin of these newly-dead. I am not God Who made them, Who roused
them into breath. Nor can I

resurrect them. I expect to sink into soupy stench myself one day, past knowing, beyond
the muscular struggle of the brain to hoist

thoughts on cells. When I picture how fin compelled flesh through water or wing lifted torso
to air, I restore

some lost, dear ransom got by Time. With chert-scarred hands I trace my way across the fossil layers.
Free each bone and story together. And see: they live again, in me.

The Ammonite Recalls a Minor Landslip

[T]he death of my old faithful dog quite upset me, the Cliff fell upon him and killed him in a moment before my eyes, and close to my feet, it was but a moment between me and the same fate.

-- Mary Anning, letter to Charlotte Murchison, 11 October 1833

Just a lowly creature stuck in stone, a discus crowded
with my kind. Parched by the eons, our ocean gone. A
tremor troubled me and my kin. The tool the woman

Anning used banged against the rock. All round

our matrix groaned as the wave barged in: a shift greater than the one wrought
by Anning's arm. From her throat she reared a terrible roar, then rose
another creature's whine. The ground grunted, rolled shoulders, but gave
no fight. A quiet hunkered close and the gravel-spatter stopped.

Her wails clambered up that space. Jagged rasp of "Tray!"
Against the clay her hands scrabbled till the men's calls
neared, and the ground's silence told she was carried off. Yet a mind
tarried. Some fresh and curious spirit searched the chalk.

Of its substance we knew not. An energy panted, rushed our huddle
as though it could not brake. But then a great outgush of breath, a sigh.
The circle of sediment unsettled in its wake. A gust like something solid dropped
into our bed. And we understood: this new animal joined in our rest.

Miss Anning, On Her Reticence

Door to door, I carry my satchel, dispense deductions, infusions, what I can
to the villagers. Little is there to share. Mum's and my hunger hold
first claim. Wild eye of the fossil fish – or whatever creature he be – holds all other.

When through that crazed socket God glances, I look back. I do not shrink
from His gaze. Nor do I suspend myself from His cross, but hang
from the cliff's arms alone. My canniest monster. Triangular face of a tortured merman

struck speechless by stone. Tethered. I gather close my own silence: bonnet I lace tight. Tied
bow that keeps my words safe from the cravatted gentlemen who seek bones and secrets
from my store, my shore. No more shall they take

the kindred I've unearthed, my fantastic fish from their life in the mineral
sea. Cast in sand, cast in silence. Hard, sharp jaws locked in rock. Off
men carried my plesio-babies, my dragon-darlings, to sell for a ransom in the city. Published

their findings as if *they* found them. No longer. Should I grow old, I will keep
what stones I can. Too many of them gone. The gentleman-scholar roams
our cliffside: peculiar hat-topped locust. No more will I feed such pestilence.

Her Eye Upon the Hours, Miss Anning Hears Her Late Dog Sing a Hymn to Laudanum

A veil, a curtain, a wavering sheet,
a phosphorous drape, a scintillant sleeve
of motes and must, of objects and those whom they arrest
behind their cover, such covert drape
of light across the senses spread
to sieve the sighs that cannot cease, the pinch
of a sound shaped like a shell
coils in her cochlea. An eavesdropped prayer, a bell
rung once in the throat of her terrier. Garlands of notes ride the
palate's rafters and round
the oooooout-arch of the singing dog's
mouth. Hollowed, they sound
the walls of the phial. His canine calls
contract to lozenges
swallowed by words that swell
no song, each silent octave
swirls: cupped in the lantern's oil, each lead-lidded note roils.

Note: Anning lived with breast cancer for the last three years of her life. Laudanum was one of the few palliatives available to the dying during this period.