F. J. Bergmann - Glossolithia

The condition proved to be untreatable. Following the first austere reports in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, it spread slowly westward, crossing the Mississippi seventeen months after the first confirmed diagnosis. Initially, doctors assumed their patients were concealing objects in their mouths, or swallowing and vomiting them up at will, as a manifestation of adolescent hysteria (the first to be afflicted were always teenage girls). When the volume exceeded any imaginable human capacity, paranormal researchers began to take an interest.

One enterprising pediatrician deliberately elicited from a young patient, by means of lengthy oral interviews, several thousand faceted gemstones, claiming that they were necessary for lab samples. All were first-quality rubies and sapphires, which he sold on eBay. He was much less attentive to her older siblings, who generally produced only worthless pebbles, or, if greatly annoyed, toads and tadpoles. By the time their parents realized his deception and lack of progress with the condition, they too had become infected. The parents’ case was frequently cited by specialists to exemplify how emotions colored formation of the objects in question; how their daughters’ physician had perished beneath a barrage of invective and small—but poisonous—snakes.

Politicians were especially inconvenienced as their campaign promises and rhetoric took tangible form, to the dismay or delight of supporters and detractors alike. Particularly noisome ideologies became the projectiles that drove their proponents from the platform. Comedians and poets performed with mikes turned off, and were judged by the quality of the material goods they produced for audiences to enjoy.

Coughing and sneezing from sufferers generated, respectively, moths and butterflies. Some became voluntarily mute before any symptoms had the opportunity to manifest. The form of whatever onerous ghosts or ominous histories would have been expressed from the torque of their earlier torments could not be inferred, their quiescent tongues burdened only with silence.

But singers—and their enchanted listeners—gloried in the birds that flew from their tongues. The fascinated fans of a great opera diva never tired of the flights of swans that soared out from each of her sublime arias.

first appeared in *Lakeside Circus*