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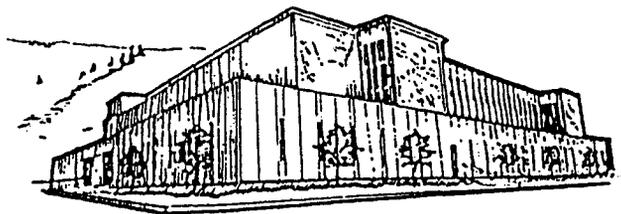
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THE BESTIARY

by

Matt Yurdana

B.A., University of California, Davis, 1989

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

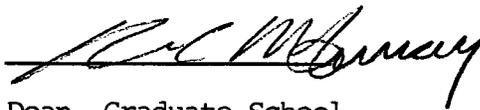
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CutBank: "A Gathering of Cardiovascular Surgeons"

Kinesis: "The Lost Dog"

Plainsongs: "Killing Birds," "Last Day in Portugal,"
"Leaving the Yolo County Raptor Center"

Poetry Northwest: "Houdini's Boyhood," "Ontogeny,"
"The Wheelchair Repairman Watches a Storm,
Agnews State Mental Hospital"

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PART 1

THE SLEEP OF BEARS

The boy wore bright yellow on the green water,
kicking himself
toward the center of the lake.

What I remember of his fear comes back
as sound and color,

the hissing of an inner tube,
pulling him up into sunlight
by a fistful of blonde hair.

A flock of blackbirds
flushed above the trees as his lungs sputtered,
and to this day I think of their dark wings
at the sound of splashing.

This is what my own fear brings back
to comfort me.

These are my first thoughts
as I watch the drugged bear sleeping
on the gravel runway.

I climb into the cargo helicopter
and sit on the floor,
watching the crew heave against his loose, bristling pelt
and slide him toward me
resting his head on my lap,

and because the drugs are unpredictable,
I slip the barrel of my gun between his teeth and watch

for his narrow eyes to flutter
or his breathing to change from its deep rattling
as the helicopter whines and rises
in its own storm of dust.

We are sending him back,
but this implies that he has come forward

out of the dark ravines,
loping over tundra that curves from distance,
something like a compass in his heart
thumping and pointing the way
to our dumpsters and burn piles.

It implies we know where he began.

(stanza break)

So I watch the silver clouds sifting
through the green hemlocks below us, the harmless lakes
shimmering like puddles.

I smooth the cinnamon fur
on his neck,
and finger his thick burnished claws.

I put my hand on his great snout,
cold as a dog's nose,

and think of the moment of his waking, smelling me
and the faint odor of diesel,
the dim taste of metal
long after we have left him in a meadow.

And because I cannot imagine a bear having fear,
he rises on his hind legs, grunting,
ready to charge into nothing but breeze
and the humming mosquitoes.

Then we are gone, forgotten,
and he is drifting upslope through hemlocks.

But today not the wind,
nor the grinding engine will wake
this sleeping bear,

and I know I will carry him for years,

cradling his head
as we fly to a thousand meadows.

I will remove the gun
and rest my hands in his mouth, staring
into his muddy eyes

until our lives and their consequences
fall away,
until he is pure image.

ONTOGENY

For seven years
Doris has dissected cecropia moths,

extracting hormones
from the reddish powdery heads
pinned in rows on the wax tablets.

She is pretty like a moth.
Her hands feather over the probes
and tiny scalpels,

testing a genetic pesticide which confuses
the moth's molting pattern,

so that they blunder after adolescence,
short-winged larvae wobbling
and fighting their own bodies.

Three months since her husband's cancer
and Doris still swims at midnight
in Lake Vasona. She leaves

the silent house, walking
under red alders and yellow streetlights,
her shadow pulling
from each bright spot into darkness,

and buys vodka
from Harry's 24-hour market
where a young man from the college
hovers and asks what she studies.

He hears her say math, and drifts off
glaring at his shoes,

and Doris understands him,
like moths quivering
against the neon beer signs,
like the pull of hormones,

and her husband's hands unsteady
on her breasts, as if brittle panes of glass
formed the husks of their bodies.

Tonight she is guided by sounds,
the abrupt silence of crickets
in the hydrangea, mallards gabbling over
a field of clover, under thin bright stars
clear as vodka.

(stanza break)

She can hear the whole lake shifting
the old cans and small pebbles,

and her limbs gleam against the limbs
of oaks, clothes strewn
in the dry grass, stepping into water
that receives her.

Each day moves like this,
she thinks, the steady pull of crickets
until dawn,

and pushing through darkness
which is both now and tomorrow

and buoyant,
only the sound of breathing,
fingers going numb,

the moon floating on her belly.

THE WHEELCHAIR REPAIRMAN WATCHES A STORM,
AGNEWS STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL

The first heavy drops
chase the patients from the courtyard,

single-file in dull green uniforms
in the sudden dull light,
as if the wind carried dusk in the clouds
bunching on the horizon.

He has known them for 17 years,
each twitch and murmur, their wide faces
comfortable as the wrench
in his hand, the grease gun, rows of wheels,
the way each tool matches
its blue outline on the workshop pegboard.

He cannot help Bernard, afternoons,
heaving the basketball again and again
two feet short of the hoop,
rolling after rebounds,
drool darkening his t-shirt,

or Jolene, who rode wheelies
in the cafeteria, cracking her skull
on the checkered tiles.

There is only the shipment of new bearings,
the tightening of spokes.

He replaces worn tread, stripped bolts,
threadbare canvas,
and the wheelchairs go out
like smooth chariots,
their crooked bodies gliding
down the long fluorescent halls.

He follows a nurse, third floor,
the electric doors
buzzing inward like metal wings.

There is a boy
sleeping alone in the rec room,
strapped from neck to ankles
to a wheelchair, left wheel sagging,
as if a great invisible weight
rides beside him.

(stanza break)

The nurse says Lesch-Nyhan syndrome,
a demon living
in his central nervous system,
making him gnaw
at the bandaged nubs of his hands
when they are not cinched
to the armrests.

The wheel is ruined.
The boy's breath
smells of cherry Lifesavers,
his eyes, two sluggish fish roaming
in their sleep.

Slowly, he loosens the velcro straps,
the leather chest restraints,
and lifts the boy
who is nothing more than his pajamas
and clean white gauze.

He steps to the window,
strong and simple
like the eucalyptus trees
pitching along the street,
leaves and strips of bark swarming
on the wind.

His reflection
stands with the yellowing foothills,

towers in the muddied sky
as the rain pelts
rows of burnished rooftops.

In this moment, he contains
the whole city, consuming
bridges, plazas, the bell tower, spreading
the length of the expressway,
small polished cars creeping through him,

a continuous undulation so complete
he cannot distinguish himself
from the glass, the wind, or the sleeping boy.

THE BESTIARY

I want to make love to Carla, my lab partner,
in the bestiary,

our hands
fumbling with buttons and zippers
beneath the jars
of segmented worms, sea urchins, the coiled hagfish,
behind the five foot Bolivian iguana,

our gasps
lost in the hissing
of a dozen Bunsen burners.

Three hours a week, we huddle together
scalpels in hand,

and the squids or fetal pigs
we mutilate so carefully
are still a mystery. For three hours

this is all we have in common.

If we only had more time, wandering
among the giant chestnut weevils
or canisters of spotted tree frogs.

We would know the knobbed whelk from 1965,
from the coast of Florida,
propped on its lumpy whorls and sealed
in a small pool of formaldehyde,

the Indonesian nautilus,
tentacles lolling
beyond its tightly chambered shell,

the glowing nudibranchs,
musk turtles and terrapins
all bobbing in their jars,

all shelved as if they belonged
in this storeroom in California.

We might lay naked on our lab coats,
pointing out
what was once awkward and strange,

the whole afternoon spent
touching,
whispering our names.

A GATHERING OF CARDIOVASCULAR SURGEONS

Dr. Veer, the keynote speaker, opens
with a joke about the swiss cheese fondue,

two types of cholesterol, "good"
and "delicious,"
and he winks along the banquet, his colleagues
sipping their aperitifs.

How lovely it was
to be eager and serious, he says,
that first open-heart practicum:

an irish setter,
his limp paws and his thin damp coat,
his rib cage
sawed open, arteries clamped
with small gleaming forceps.

One cannot forget that first time groping
inside another body.

Everything so close and almost hot,
and your fingers slip
under the left ventricle,
cradling it,

believing in that muscle's steady hitch
and wobble, as if startled
by the touch.

By sunset, they have toasted
that tragic, magnificent dog for hours.

Some lean into the breeze
on the glass verandah,
others wade
in the fountain below the stone boy,
pouring endlessly
from his fluted urn.

When the music begins, the timbales
and congas and horns,

Dr. Dubois in a strapless cocktail gown,
mambos in tight circles,
coaxing her lanky husband.

(stanza break)

Dr. Wheeler pulls off his shoes, suspenders
dangling at his hips.

And Dr. Veer is famous for his rumba.
He weaves his partner, a first-year intern,
among the ferns and palmettos

and the courtyard clears.

She is blushing, her dress whisking
from her thighs
with the lazy swish of maracas.

Her feet chase
his quick, sweeping half-steps.

A few moments,
and she finds the pattern,
swinging and pulling
from his arms, tight as a shadow or mirror.

She feels the whispers and nods,

his right hand hovering
near the small of her back.

THE CARDIOLOGIST'S DIVORCE

On his office wall
there is a diagram
of the conducting system of the heart.

He is the sinus node,
a specialized tissue

one-tenth the size of a raisin,

near the entrance of the right atrium,
the pacemaker
that dictates impulse and contraction.

She is the atrioventricular node,
a similar bundle of cells and fibers

located millimeters down
the blood stream
at the juncture of the ventricle.

She suffers
from emotional angina.

She waits for each signal
and responds a fraction sooner
than her own inclination,

always in accordance
with his working rhythm.

Their divorce, like the classic experiment
by Herman Stannius,
the German physiologist,

will ligature the connection
between nodes, stopping

all synapses like silent tongues.

There will be the slightest pause,
a small hiccup,
before the heart keeps pumping.

HOUDINI'S BOYHOOD

He slips from the house, no lights,
an hour before dawn,

the world taking the shape of sounds,

his footfall
on the graveled levee,

and farther,
the only streetlight in town
buzzing from yellow to red,

and beyond that, a rising squall
which is the great flocks of geese
waking in Delmer's alfalfa.

At the water's edge,
he crawls
under an old refrigerator box

disguised with mud,
cattails, long limp strands of tule.

He has seen hunters lie down
in the fields of young winter wheat,
hidden with netting

and old burlap
an hour before first light,

the frost melting under their bodies,

as if they waited beneath
the landscape,

geese wheeling at daybreak
over the field they had become.

And now hundreds arrive,
surround him,
the yelping and straining wings
from every Spring morning of his life,

as light slowly defines
the one small hole that allows the marsh in.

(stanza break)

Everything he learns, he learns
in darkness,
the long painful crouching,
to balance his weight with his toes,

He breathes shallow and silent

in the middle of these birds
that preen and squabble
into a new day, nudging the cardboard,

and he is convinced
he is not here.

PART 2

FIRE AT KWONG'S RUBBER LIZARD FACTORY,
GAOXIONG, TAIWAN

It happened on a Monday during the Month of the Dead.
The milky smoke rolled above the expressway,
down the alleys where families burned holy money
in hammered brass tins for their dead relations,
sending prosperity up in thin columns of sparks and ashes.

Food was heaped at the temples to keep them happy.
Widows and lovers avoided swimming in rivers
where it was said the spirits of unlucky men
slept under the stones and rushing water.
Some fretted the whole month, puttering at home,
as if a thin door could hold back
the memory of lost children.

When the crowds came slouching up Shou Bei street
the swing shift was already gasping in the yard.
A bitter latex haze colored the sunset.
People flinched and murmured as the windows burst
and the roof blackened like the shadows of flames.

It was Lao Wu, the old janitor, who crawled out last,
weeping and dragging his glowing chain of keys
behind him. From the boiler room,
he had first heard the fire as a deep rumble
and before he topped the stairs the heat
pressed his chin to the concrete floor.

Everywhere burned. Paint blistered on the vats
of rubber. Lightbulbs popped. The old sprinklers
hung like rusty brands from the ceiling.

And Lao Wu crawled and moaned
like a man who has touched and smelled
his own death, and his hair melting in clumps
and his scorched hands pulling him along,
were like the conveyers of burning lizards
leaping one by one into the green
bubbling pool of themselves.

And in that mass of bodies
becoming one, he saw the face of his father
as it had been in 1939, just after the stroke:
the wilting mouth, the swollen tongue,
the terrible left eye that saw everything
a boy did and nothing at all.

It was then he began to weep
for the pain he had forgotten,

weeping and crawling into the cool evening,
into the crowd of murmurs and painful hands
like a child belonging to them all,
wide-eyed and misshapen, already shivering
in their cool damp blankets.

THERE WAS A LINGUIST AND HIS SON

There was a linguist and his son
driving across Nevada.
After lunching in Lovelock
the linguist began pointing
off the shimmery highway,
and his son, five years old,
followed his hand as it touched
on animals and landmarks.
He told the boy that everything
has a sound, each lizard,
tree, and mountain range
vocalizing, and this music
is the way the world speaks
with itself. So the boy
began talking in high-pitched
chirps to the sparrows
feeding in the roadside sage.
He hummed through his nose
at the tires of passing cars.
He puffed out his cheeks
in a half-buzz, half-rumble
as clouds lumbered in groups
over a distant water tower.
They stopped at a Texaco
and he gurgled, and felt
the hose thrumming in his hands
as his father pumped the gas.
But the most beautiful thing
he discovered was the car's
grill, smothered with a mosaic
of crushed insects, tattered
moths and bees faded
to the color of the road.
Some were beyond recognition
and he fingered the stiff wings,
guessing with clicks or whines
at the sounds that defined them.
He touched one and it moved.
A twisted grasshopper, its legs
pinned with grime and the juices
of other bugs. He pried it loose
and it wobbled in his hand.
"Fuck off," it said.

THE MAGNITUDE OF ANCIENT FRAGMENTS

Like the exhuming of a giant,
the site stretched fifteen acres, trenched
and leveled. The archaeologist brought
tractors, cranes, and a diesel winch

to dredge the sandy hillside,
but only salvaged one hand, one foot, marked
with the crosshatch of straining cables,
a compound of stains and scars.

Too bulky for halls or galleries,
the ancient fragments loom above magnolias
and the palms and statues posing
along the walkways of the museum's piazza.

It is no surprize the tourist
after visiting sacred Egyptian objects
and collections of chipped pottery
or questionable arrowheads, strolls back

to these toes the size of boulders,
this massive hand, somewhere between
pointing and waving. The retired couples
take photos, smiling like teens

beside the huge instep. Children dream
of hoisting themselves into the hand
with fingers curling like slender trees.
And everyone touches those old, sand-worn

stones, and marvels at how things so large
could hide for centuries without a trace,
imagining how it stood above everything,
with legs, arms, torso, a face.

ON THE DOCKS, LATE AUGUST

The pink mooring buoys hang
from the gunwales
like the swim bladders of chum salmon,
globed and slippery.
The coiled steel cable
has rusted the same deep umber
as the wolffish,
flecked and crusty as the rocks
it hides under.
And the skewed levers and wires
jutting from the bad hydraulics
mimic the splayed pectoral fins of a sculpin,
as it drifts with the tide,
with the diesel and sinking branches.
We come home to the docks
each night, exhausted
and we walk the loose planks stained
every few yards
with the shapes of what we bring with us:
the canary rockfish
fading slowly as daylight,
shrimp kicking in a dry coffee can
like the drumming of fingers,
a flounder gaffed
above its crowded eyes,
underside as big and white
as a freshly laundered sheet.
And a man pulls an octopus
inside out in a bucket of inky water,
water black as the closet
I locked Cheryl Swaney in
when I was seven,
black for hours,
and when I opened the door
she only whimpered
and wouldn't come out.

IN MY PARENT'S GARAGE, PRIOR TO THEIR MOVING TO OREGON,
RUMMAGING AND LISTENING

I find a framed lithograph,
"Shooting Passenger Pigeons, Louisiana, 1869,"
wedged between a set of macrame place mats
and a toaster oven with its elements
jutting like antennas, in a pile
growing and waiting for the Salvation Army.
Behind barns and trees, pigeons rise
like a dark tornado funneling skyward.
Farmers roam the fields with guns.
In this light, the man
with the terrier tense at his heels
looks like my father.
He has the same nose and thin knobby knees.
As far as I know, my father
has never been to Louisiana.
The only hunting he talks about
happened in 1955, after two years
stationed in Italy, while visiting
relatives in Kastav, Yugoslavia.
His cousin, Voiko, owned a scooter.
The morning before he flew home,
already drunk on plum brandy,
they drove the willow-lined paths
to the marsh, watched blurry geese
flap out of range and the bobbing reeds
the color of brass. They nipped
from a cold flask, staying drunk enough
to ignore the silence between them.
Two young men who knew
they would grow old
without ever knowing one another.
But on the ride back, a pheasant flushed
like a frenetic moth
killing itself against the headlight.
Voiko staggered over to the bird
and clutched its limp neck.
He clicked his tongue, dancing slow circles,
laughing into the trees,
kissing my father tenderly on both cheeks
in the presence of this miracle,
a gift my father cradled, a feathered relic
already stiffening in his hands,
as he slumped behind his cousin
and the scooter weaved home by moonlight.

LAST DAY IN PORTUGAL

The train staggers
the length of the country,
lurching and hissing for mail drops,
for sheep crossing near
Viana do Castelo, through valleys
and low-roofed towns engulfed
by the dank vineyards
we can smell through
cracked windows. I am counting
rows of fruit trees
high on the rolling horizon.
My brother is asleep
beside me on the cramped seat,
our knees banging.
Last week, he shaved his head
in Madrid, in a salon
where the hairdresser cried,
"mira, mira!" to girls loitering
in the shade of the drugstore,
as she dragged the clippers
over his scalp and clumps fell
on her yellow slippers
and the little potted plants,
and she only cackled
when he tried to pay.
This is our last day in Portugal,
and my brother is asleep,
the stubbly knob of his head
knocking against my shoulder,
a little drool on his chin.
I want to hold his beautiful head
and point to the horizon
with its galloping fruit trees,
and feed him sandwiches
stuffed with tomatos and cheese,
and apologize for the pain
and torment I brought
to his childhood. I want
to haul him wobbling
from sleep and wander
through the passenger cars
back to the caboose.
I want us to stink
of grease and rust,
and clutch the black railing,
and hear the long whistle,
and swing the red lantern
above the warped tracks
that shine and carry us along.

LEAVING OAXACA

I watch you enter the shade
of the bodega
for a bottle of red wine,
holding your left sandal
like a hammer,
crushing the black widows
that hang at the edge of shadows.

Lupita's son
scoops butterflies
off the stiff rose buds
with a plastic cup,
and with a look like concentration,
he pinches them one by one
and lets them fall,
trembling on the lawn.
It is a tough evening for insects.

I can hear the day slipping away,
the beer vendors
coughing down calle Volcanes,
dogs giving up the shade,
a radio plays Malaguena
from an open window
above the drugstore.

You say the thunderstorms are a comfort.
You can see them coming,
drenching the afternoons briefly,
until the plants
and roofs and pavement steam.

I will take that smell with me,
and this hammock
and these two bending trees,
and yesterday, you and I
wandering at the market,

our goodbyes said weeks earlier
in the way you walk boldly
across traffic,
the way you stare
into those worn green mountains.

Not buying, just a slow passage
through a maze
of shouts and stalls.

(no stanza break)

A woman sat on a tarp
behind five mounds of chapulines,
the traditional food of love,
small grasshoppers fried whole
in lemon and garlic.

She wagged a finger at me,
winking, muttering
and you translated,
"try these gringo,
and you'll stay, never leave."

I bit through the tortilla
and they were brittle and sour,
their little spurs
catching on my tongue.
"Chew them slowly," she said,
"and swallow."

THREE SMALL LESSONS FROM TAIPEI

1.

From here there is a view of terrible balance.
Broad-leafed plants and T.V. antennas lean out
over rooftops. Below, beyond a fence,
a bottle lies unbroken on a pitched roof, caught
at the edge between two adjacent tiles.
A small balcony holds a washing machine
with no lid. The water slowly fills
then sloshes just below the rim. Between
each object what holds, and in turn, is held?
How can I sit on this tenth-story veranda
above markets, traffic, the distant rice fields,
while nothing collapses or fails to stand
without an air of tension? Yet all seems fine,
together and separate, like clothes on a line.

2.

Three mounds of bean sprouts, a tin of Jasmine tea,
the blue and pimpled skin of chicken legs
and rows of pigs feet, hooves still wet and shiny,
a smell of incense, curry, and boiled egg
behind the piles of cabbage placed beside
stacks of baskets and sturdy unwashed bowls,
under strings of garlic, drying squid
and a single glaring light bulb,
he stands, humming quietly, splitting chickens
with three quick strokes from thighs to neck,
while she kneels before a large metal basin
filled with tiny mussels, streaked gray and black
beneath the clear water like polished stones,
turning them over and over in her hands.

3.

They are graceful, like an egret's
flawless black legs and balanced neck, the women
strolling in pairs beside the tennis courts,
bellies round with Dragon babies, while pigeons
return to rooftops and the sparrows feed
in the high grass between benches.
Sometimes fish roll upward, flashing green
against the dark river. Their small splashes
are concentric circles growing larger.
Once, on an evening like this, three fishermen
threw their nets across the water
in long magnificent curves, and like children,
with their hands behind them, bowed and grinned
before they hauled the nets back in.

PART 3

HOW I REMEMBER AUNT RITA

The gas station is out of gas until noon.
I wait with Paul, the attendant,
by the immaculate green rows of motor oil.

My Aunt Rita's funeral begins in three hours.
I remember Christmas, nine years old,
Aunt Rita in her lavender dress,

full-blown roses smelling of cold cream,
so happy to see us, her eyes glistened.
When she clutched me to her waist,

my left ear pressed into her hip bone
and the skin above her elbows shook.
And she hung on, as if each Christmas

I would forget more of her, as if that house
tilting toward the Pacific,
the smell of wet wool and anchovies,

and the toads and crickets singing
beneath her rosebush could vanish
in the oncoming fog of adolescence.

Geese fly over the station.
Paul sights them over his thumb and index finger,
"I love them honkers," he says,

and pulls the imaginary trigger.
He tells me they mate for life.
Their cheek patches are like fingerprints.

He tells me of a cold October morning
when he stripped off his camouflage
and crawled, gun in hand, across a frozen pond,

his stomach frostbitten and bleeding,
toward geese squabbling behind a tangle of willows
until he was a barrel-length away,

until he could hear the rustle and click
of feathers being preened, feet slapping the bank,
the little clouds of breath rising from their bills.

"I can prove it," he says,
raising his shirt over his belly.
And above the stretch marks and the glossy scar

(stanza break)

where doctors removed his appendix,
flies the tattoo of a lone goose,
wings stretching across his rib cage,

gaining altitude, its head pointing north,
so blue against his pale skin
I believe him.

GROWING UP NEAR TRAINS

Our small town flickers at dusk
and holds nothing left to abuse.
The battered mailbox, cats trapped in dumpsters,
even sprayed obscenities on a roadside farmhouse

have lost their drama. Friday nights,
the flicker turns to a steady glow.
We gulp illegal beers and stagger
out to the empty depot,

where a northbound Southern Pacific
highballs into darkness. The whistle leans
up-track, wheels glance the rails
with every lurch of the train.

We clamber a thin-planked bridge
while the freight rumbles below
like a goaded beast, each long belly
stuffed with lumber or livestock, one eye slowly

sweeping and beaming the way to Portland.
The bridge becomes a saddle
and we sway above the passing weight,
riding the rusty, mile-long animal

without moving at all. And into the night
we send a volley of hoots and empty bottles
christening all down its blundering length,
a hollow shatter that's almost musical.

KILLING BIRDS

Still clumsy
in their juvenile
plumage, twenty tree sparrows

flit across
the road in loose flocks.
Six of them patter between

the headlights
then tumble and flap
in the rear-view mirror.

He turns back.
He's never seen birds,
only heard tweet and chatter

from the trees,
chirps in the brambles,
at most a glimpse of blurred wings

or glance at
the small silhouettes
that dot the drooping phone lines.

He parks, leaves
the car idling,
kneels in the roadside gravel.

Their bodies
are nearly weightless
and warm against his fingers;

this one: dark
whisker stripe and crown,
the bill badly chipped and split,

half-closed lids.
That one: a stiff, crushed
wing and heavily streaked breast.

Necks swivel
at shocking angles.
Each tail is notched, a simple,

shallow "V."
He kneels until his legs
ache, until each mark and line

(stanza break)

is remembered
and the whole image
of sparrow burns in his mind.

Carefully,
he tucks one beneath
a patch of woolly mullein,

stashes three
behind a road sign,
another in the tangle

of ragweed,
until every bird
is properly out of sight.

DEATH OF A PUFFERFISH

It is a condition resembling depression.
Like a weak balloon, he follows the current
into the Gulf of Mexico and forgets
his romantic, sometimes ravenous, youth
when he tucked loosely in a vesicular sac.

For the first time in his life
he looks up, notices it is shallow,
a shifting cerulean blue
as demanding as a low ceiling.

He wonders what causes this terminal deflating,
how he maintains his meager circumference.
The familiar grooves in his reef miles behind,
he finds this open water irritating.
With each new moon, the tide pulls hard
and he follows, and diminishes.

THE LOST DOG

He breaks the weakest link
with a few startled strides past his own worn circle
 around the peach tree,
breaks into a run across the yard,
flustering chickens, laundry dropping from the lines
 in his wake,
shouts and whistles from the open window
as he clears the fence, clears the weedy culvert,
as the road turns from muddy ruts, to gravel, to pavement.
He runs southeast because the daffodils point that way.
He runs like a rabbit bolting through tumbleweeds.
He runs down the yellow line. His paws click pavement
as he runs and his shoulders bunch, and his tongue,
thick with slobber, wags over his shoulder.
He runs to remember what running was like,
sprinting into town, past neighborhoods, past the mailman,
the drugstore, the post office and diner, pedestrians gawking
 from the sidewalks,
the swerve and honk of cars, and main street narrowing
 like a funnel.
He runs full-tilt through the rush hour.
He runs with six feet of galvanized chain rattling
 behind him.
He runs beside his reflection in the spinning of hubcaps,
through exhaust and oil, through each intersection.
He runs and runs and the street lights burn green.

THE NEAR COLLAPSE OF THE HOLY CROSS ASSEMBLY

The land behaves like water,
rippling the asphalt past the corner of 3rd and Montgomery,

where a mailbox topples and hydrants
burst and shower

the open convertibles and store front windows,
where the Holy Cross Assembly

dodders
beside the jolted parking meters.

Each heave, like a wave
through the unhinged doors, rolls

beneath the mahogany pews. The walls splinter.
A crucifix

falls two stories of stained glass, impaling the Wurlitzer.
It buckles but stands

on this Monday morning,
the land slowing like a pendulum,

43 seconds,
as slow as the briefest pain,

candles and relics rocking back into place,
the slow sun

utterly quiet on the fractured glass,
somewhere inside a thin hissing of steam.

LEAVING THE YOLO COUNTY RAPTOR CENTER

Down rows of rusty, chicken-wire cages
I dole out dead mice and quartered hamsters
and scrub the chalky crust off perches.
For months, the osprey suffered bumble foot.
The yellowed talons and feet curled
like my uncle Edward's hands, left crippled
from toiling on fishing boats, hands that stayed
blue-veined and callused, cradling his morning coffees
in a kitchen soured from years of cod and herring.
And the dusty, tatter-winged plumage
of the turkey vulture recalls
grandma Lorraine, shuffling thin-boned
under a gloomy housecoat, her nose
keen as a blade, head bald and wrinkled
beneath a silver wig. I cannot ignore
my family, stooped and flapping
their days into weeks, months into years.
Aunt Gloria the nervous falcon, my mother
the harrier with a busted tail,
cousin Kenny, a barn owl with bones
that droop and fuse like soldered wires.
They're found slumped at the base
of telephone poles or limping off highways
or brought in by the well-meaning and confused,
tucked and bleeding in an old shoe box.
They keep coming because I remind them
of what they used to be, ignorant, young and ambitious,
earning my way through school, as I shuffle
from cage to cage, gazing out at the same
chicken-wire view. Each dusk,
before I unlatch the gate, they tremble on perches,
squawk and hoot from the dark cages,
calling to me in the failing light
as if I could bring back their lives.

MY DAYS WITH EARL KESSLER

No words, no variety, the forklifts
droning in the warehouse
as I packed frozen salmon for 3 months
and 2 weeks, 12 hours a day,
across from Earl Kessler
in the cold room of Phoenix Seafoods.

Earl wore a thick purple sock
on the stump that was his left arm,
sometimes pointing it my way
when I became sloppy or lazy,
or when my box slipped from the conveyer,
the fish falling solid as bricks.

But mostly it kept our tempo,
a small pendulum measuring the hours
between breaks, and I knew the rumor
of how he lost the rest,
a few wrong inches
after 12 hours with a hay baler
on a farm in Nevada,

or that other rumor,
how he gouged a man's eyes
with that single crooked thumb,

or the one I almost believed,
that he was mauled
by three Dobermans and a pit bull
on his mother's 35th birthday,
stumbling into the house, holding
what was left of his elbow
as she was blowing out the candles.

Mornings before work there was no horizon,
no imprint in the fog
dividing sky from water, rows of boats
adrift on the air.

I would pour our coffee from Earl's thermos
while we leaned on the hull
of an upturned skiff, watching the net menders
spooling mounds of herring web,
the small harbor waking in the fog,

convinced I was learning what it meant to work,
to pass unharmed through the days
of boredom and stiff fingers.

(no stanza break)

I carried the image of those beautiful boats
like a kind of medicine,
down into the cold room
where we stooped over the heavy fish
until our backs were sweating
and we breathed in unison.

I haven't learned much since.
The rumors and foggy mornings are touchstones,
and when I choose to see Earl Kessler
it is that Saturday I spied him upriver,

shirtless, straddling a dead log,
his head, shoulders, and ruined arm
covered with bread crumbs,
and a flock of chickadees
falling and rising from his body.