

ST. FRANCIS

Infinite chickadees gather
at Francis of Assisi's feet.
A rich man's coddled son,
that sweet talker was
a wastrel and womanizer
before his conversion
to cheerful man of God
and animal whisperer.
He told finches and tanagers,
Be thankful for your colorful clothes,
and they've been chirping gleefully
perched on his statues ever since.

Church lore recounts the time
an adder was poised to strike
before Francis sang it to sleep,
and how, after the Holy Friar
had pleaded with a wolf
to quit devouring people,
the beast became content
to feed on kitchen scraps.

At first, Francis was deemed crazy
and heretical, but in time he turned
his scoffer's rocks and curses
to welcoming grins and bells
for his entourage of blessed beggars,
whom he taught,
*Value golden coins no more
than pebbles in the road,
all you really need
is a little food, and love.*

The man was so blissed out,
in his later years he wrote
a canticle to the sun
whose light he could no longer see.

I imagine his affable manner
made him irresistible to women,
but as he aged,
he couldn't be bothered with romance
as he was free of worldly wealth,
ill and blind,
and flush with love of God
and animals.

4,000 BIRDS FALL FROM THE SKY

After the plummet of the birds,
it's normal that reporters would flock
to Beebe, Arkansas, to scratch
for stories, that bloggers' keyboards
would chatter climate change,
evangelists divine a doomsday sign.
Almost inaudible amid
media-squawk, the on-site
ornithologist states,
It's natural for birds to fall from the sky.

My college roommate used to say
Human artifacts are natural—
whether matter is formed
into alder branch for nesting birds,
or styrofoam computer packing,
he'd argue, *All are shares of Nature.*

Every New Year's Eve it's usual
for liquor-kindled people
to stumble into frigid darkness
to cheer themselves
with fireworks and gunshot.
Not surprising that in Beebe
the dazzle and thunder frightened
roosting blackbirds and starlings
into the sky. Nothing unnatural
in hailstones pummeling birds back down.

All natural, the whooping sounds,
the guns' reports, starbursts, hailstorm,
4,000 birds dead on the ground.

TIMEPIECE

Now the tall clock has stopped.
Our Great Grandfather, who would've fixed it,
is gone, and I've called around to find
the town's last grandfather clock repairman
won't come out of retirement.

Just as the bats
that used to tremble from my eaves at dusk
won't come sidling back.
The man has not been born
who can take back the pesticide

from bugs they ate,
who can undo white-nose fungus,
who can restore
their colony from stillness.
Yes, no one's left who'll come

to put time back on track,
whose hands have known the swing
and heft of a pendulum.
None are privy to the inner workings
now clogged with dirty oil.

Those chimes and springs
have been consigned to the attic.
Up there I wish I'd find
some tiny pearls of bat scat.
And Great Grandfather himself,

who could fix anything.

MOTHER IS MOVING

She gives away trappings to live her last days
as a saint on a rest home's top floor.
To the poor she donates sweaters,
rolling pin, picture frames. To the church
goes the furniture of a sturdier age—

oak bureau, rocking chair, grandfather clock.
To my daughter, wafer-thin heirloom spoons—
the silver of defunct republics
melted into curvatures of nourishment.
If anything is mean in her, it will be in my bones.

At dawn on her final day in her own home
Mother reads her Bible.
Through the words of Paul she travels Roman roads,
passing beggars, soldiers, confidence men,
women on the way to the well.

In ninety-one years she has seen all
the apostles and devils come and go.
Her bags are packed with private things,
she knits as she waits for the taxi.
If anything is ungrateful in her, it will be in me.

Mother looks out from her top-story window
on the world spinning away from her
as her own body begins to go.
Yesterday it was her sore shoulder,
this morning a forgotten word.

If there be any sadness, it will be mine.

THE GEESE AT BOSQUE DEL APACHE

What signal rouses seventeen thousand
 Four hundred eight snow geese
Settled in shallows

To hush their raucous murmur,
 Lift from the lake in a whirlwind,
Angle toward the horizon,

Veer back overhead,
 Drape their shadow selves
Along the rushes and lake,

Curl back down in a wave
 To resettle on the surface
Resuming their places.

What is this shiver of fear and bliss
 When their blizzard obscures the sun,
And the net of their dark shapes

Is cast across water and land
And over our upturned faces?

KITE

I step into brisk wind, reeling out string as the kite pulls me away from my stoop. My street elongates into steep shadows and plains, like a woodcut of houses lined up in sharp relief. Although I can't see it, I feel the tension on its string as the kite bobs and weaves up there with Plato and Heidegger. It leads me into a park, where a swing-set beckons me into its upended gravity, and some kid runs at me with arms outstretched mistaking me for his dad. *I'm the father of rogue molecules*, I say over my shoulder, trotting toward transubstantiation.

Still clutching the string, I'm drawn out of the park at a sprint and become airborne, losing my shoes as I rise with the belief that my self is no more and no less than this craft of balsa and silk climbing a thermal. It's cold above the wavering world I can see is not a solid globe fixed in space, not made of words or ideas, but a flow of events, flicker of star-duff, wind-ripple shape.

AN EXPLANATION

They say that clouds weigh tons.
How they stay high
is how humans,
heavy with thoughts,
keep from sinking
right through the ground.

Sometimes people quit thinking
and float, maybe in a lake
that's fast evaporating and
replenished by springs,
and the thought
of all that circulating water
is why there is rain.

The thoughts become
worries, the worries
burdens, and drop
by drop the sky
falls,
and people wrinkle
with worry
or with washing stains,

as the big wheel
of rain and evaporation
turns
and the day becomes
unbearably bright,
like the clouds weighing tons,
being light.

COPPER

Wrapped around ankles and wrists,
it joins with sweat to stain skin green.

Stamped into coins, it passes from hand
to hand. Melted with tin, it pours into shapes

for serving mead, for shooting cannonballs,
for boiling the clothes of the plowmen and queen.



Spools of copper cable, like nests of snakes
coiled in caves, waiting for the first telegraph

to tap them awake. Unwinding, they climb poles
and go into buildings, they slide underground

and stretch across the ocean floor. They extend
their nervous empire from turbines to pacemakers.



One night copper grows weary of all this
hot talk through its body. It unclasps

its rings from our magnets and limbs,
and climbs back inside mountains. Its eyes

cloud over as it begins to molt, sloughing
human kinship, growing cold and silent as ore.