

THE DARK SAFEKEEPING

GLORIA NIXON-JOHN

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*Dedicated to my students then and now
and life's unlikely teachers.*

*To the lost, imprisoned, suffering, and forgotten
of my species and all other species.*

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“You can cage the singer but not the song.”

Harry Belafonte

“Putting a man’s life to waste is not justice.”

Kenneth Eade

THE CATS OF CASTLE YARD

For the inmates of the Kentucky State Penitentiary

A visitor to the prison,
I am surprised to see
dozens of them muster
into the prison yard,
some from drainpipes,
others up and over the outside wall,
their soft agility defying
the rolling maze of barbed wire.

*Most are striped, the guard says.
A mold cast centuries before,
a speck of gold in their eyes
from Blue Ridge foxes.*

The odd one out, mostly white
with just a blaze of black
above bottle-green eyes, paces
like an expectant father
near the riveted door until
a bell rings and the iron rolls and
the men stream out, neat in khaki shirts
and trousers, a spool of pale ribbon
unwinding—they might be monks
or factory men holding to routine.

The piebald cat stretches his neck,
discriminates, not that one, not this,
the small head a metronome
until his awaited steps out
of the dark passage, drops to one knee,
touches the singular acceptance,
the arching, breaking grace.

EXCITEMENT ON DEATH ROW

When Jessie saw two
chrysalises of jade and gold
hanging from a ledge in his cell,
he became a sentry, a spy
to the coming out—could not
sleep or read—would not
leave his cell, so compelled
to witness the wonder.

Exhausted, days later
he fell asleep, and missed
the last chance metamorphoses.
(The shame and loss he felt
was hard to reckon, became
just one more possibility
stolen from him.)

The monarchs soared and lighted,
anointed common things.
Wings opened and closed
in a syncopation that reminded
him of grandpa's squeeze box.

More monarchs emerged,
joined in.
Soon the guards came
with nets on long poles
to capture the stealthier
monarchs that swarmed, lifted,
then dispersed like confetti.

Day after day the men took bets
that the monarchs would escape
the guards, who were unaccustomed
to capturing anything without
guns, clubs, Tasers and trickery.

It was particularly satisfying
to see the flying kaleidoscope
weave in and out of the locked
cells in a Kabuki dance of sorts
before they gathered in a flutter,
lifting up and out through a small breach
in an untended gate, out
into the yard, then up and up
toward the necessary
unction of sun and sky.

IN OUR SIGHTS

For Leif

Prisoner 836-770 writes,
*The prison was on lockdown
all weekend because of a fight
in the yard. I had to take a
bird bath in my sink,
had to jog in my cell, finally
read the book of poetry you sent.*

He said he liked a poem
by Stephen Dunn, about the time
Dunn asked his students to write
about their sacred place
and many of them wrote
about being in a moving car,
music playing, a companion along.

Prisoner 836-770 said the poem
reminded him of days long ago
when he would drive into the country
around Lexington, past farms,
where horses ran along the fence
as he passed, the feeling that he
was running with them
up and over the pasture gate.

Further along, he tells of a story
he heard on NPR, a story about
a spacecraft designed to collide
with a comet, to send pictures
in real-time, back down to earth
the purpose of this unclear.

The thought of distant objects
colliding offers me relief
from his walled-in sorrow,
relief from barbed assurances,

away from the key-keeper's clanging
sanctimony, the obtuse injustice
of the unseen starlit sky.

But sorrow is a useless act.
Better to hop into my car, imagine
Prisoner 836-770 along,
take to the open highway
radio blasting, Bowie singing
Ground Control to Major Tom—

a comet just barely in our sights.

PRISON BULLFROG

He usually writes about his routine,
rises before 5 a.m. to weak coffee,
scrubs floors, paints walls,
one hour in the exercise yard,
or a dream from the night before:
a fishing trip with his father long dead.

Today he writes about the bullfrog
in the alley behind his cell.
It has survived winter,
has emerged from a weep hole
in a retaining wall, so large now
it may not fit into the hole for long.

He reports that management
cut down a rose bush
that has graced the yard for years.
Take heart, he writes, *they cut*
only the stems, didn't know enough
to dig out the roots.

It is usually his regret that stays
with me long after the letter,
but today it is the frog embodied
in the small round rock that I excise
from my garden, a damp bulk
that I lift toward the sun.

I give the rock legs, long and lithe
ready to leap out and over—over,
up toward the warm light,
but his heaviness resists,
draws inward, hardens
into the dark safekeeping.

MOUSE SOUP

Prisoner #45978 writes,
*I touched it with my spork
and it was cooked.*
One of the guards took
a picture of it to share
with others for a good laugh.
The prison report
of the incident did not include
a photograph of the mouse
in a bowl of soup;
the newspaper report
spared the shock as
Administrator Jones
chortled and explained,
“If not for the distress
it caused those to whom
it was served up,
it might have been
a work of art at MOMA—
call it ‘Mouse in Soup circa 2020.’”
All in all, he concluded
that there was no need
for further inspection.

A WINTER MORNING

For Angelina

I fill the winter feeder
with sunflower seeds,
corn, orange rind—then
watch from the window.
A cardinal is the first to come;

I see his masked face
in the bare lilac bush.
His wind-swept pompadour
makes me laugh.

This is his cameo appearance.
He peck-pecks, then lifts his head,
as intense as a sommelier
until he notices me, levitates,
aims for the thicket—is gone.

I take up my field glasses,
point and focus into the tree line,
look for his feet of pink twine,
listen for his minor key—
whoit-whoit-whoit.

Instead, I hear sweeter songs,
a warble, *trill-tweet.*
I spy brown wings, the soft blue
underbelly of a thrasher,
the dusty near hue of him—
the red of twigs and winterberries.
But all else that comes in red
is never so red as he.

FAR ENOUGH

My bluetick brought it home,
dropped it on the front step,
then slinked away
as if to say *this is what I do;*
take it or leave it.

Its breathing labored,
spine an unnatural arc,
small black claws scraping
to get to anywhere else.

Young woodchuck
or possum? Too young
for distinction and I
couldn't look closely,
would see all of life there.

Instead I placed him in a soft
shady spot with a breeze,
couldn't do anything else.
It was all too late,
tableau in a crystal ball.

The next morning, he was still
as I knew he would be.
My pallbearer husband
went with gloves and spade,
an undertaker's deliberate stride

to dig a small hole—far enough
from our mutable fortune
where the groundswell
will first flatten then
welcome the dark roots.

