

THE MIGRATION OF THE TURKEY BUZZARDS

—*The Central Valley, California*

They arrive like a premonition—two
or three on the horizon, then by the dozens,
tilting in slow wheels on the updrafts,
soundless, their shadows sweeping the dry
slopes until dark falls and they settle
in the eucalyptus trees by the park.

Flight is the buzzard's only beauty:
bird without song, bald pate and beak
tearing at a cow teats up in a ditch.
I know it belongs in the order of things.
I know about reading sermons in stones.
Some towns draw swallows; some, butterflies—

hard not to believe we get what we
deserve. What better roost for buzzards
than one of our dying farm towns—museums
of emptiness—going to weeds
and rust, the water too toxic to drink,
the hopeful heading off elsewhere.

This morning, dark shapes against the leaves,
they turn to the light and open their wings
like mantles, sunning themselves as if
at ease on the shore of an ancient sea.
Somewhere a radio is playing.
Dirge is one word for what's in the wind,

though what the buzzards are listening to,
for all I know, is an ode to joy.

A STORY CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

On the morning she became a young widow,
my grandmother, startled by a sudden shadow,
looked up from her work to see a hawk turn
her prized rooster into a cloud of feathers.
That same moment, halfway around the world
in a Minnesota mine, her husband died,
buried under a ton of rock-fall.
She told me this story sixty years ago.
I don't know if it's true but it ought to be.
She was a hard old woman, and though she knelt
on Sundays when the acolyte's silver bell
announced the moment of Christ's miracle,
it was the darker mysteries she lived by:
shiver-cry of an owl, black dog by the roadside,
a tapping at the door and nobody there.
The moral of the story was plain enough:
miracles become a burden and require a priest
to explain them. With signs, you only need
to keep your wits about you and place your trust
in a shadow world that lets you know hard luck
and grief are coming your way. And for that
—so the story goes—any day will do.

ANOTHER SPRING

Another spring.
In a corner under the eaves
of the porch, a nesting dove—
the same returning dove—tosses
a few dry weeds, willy-nilly,
into the prevailing wind, then waits
for them to fall in place.
Some do.

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Because I mean her no harm
she allows me to draw close
to her precarious balcony.
I bid her good morning,
she cocks her head at me and blinks—
two old familiars who share
a moment of dappled light falling
on the peaceable kingdom
of the front porch.

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This morning, a light drift
of feathers on the lawn
and the day's expectations sour.
Each spring this dumb show of events
repeats itself: a nest abandoned, another
plundered by crow or jay, eggs
spilled from their thatch, an inch
of blue flesh, like a maimed thumb,
drying in the sun.

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Does the dove, in its season,
despite its plaintive moan, learn nothing?
And I, in mine? I fetch the paper
from the lawn, people drive by
to another day of work.
Nothing is brought to completion.
Later I'll sweep away the nest—empty,
again, of everything but a blind
belief in the possible.

SORROW SONG

—*From the Nahuatl*

What have you set in motion, Giver of Life?
A dark time, close-by and coming?
A hard-luck day I won't survive?

Even after my time
there will be spring flowers.
Even after my time fragrant blossoms

will open—
field after field of marigolds,
countless sun-bright petals . . .