

## Board Book & the Costume of a Whooping Crane

Two new words a day & sometimes three—*cup & doll*, yesterday *throat*  
& *hot, hot hot*,  
the *T* extended, *hot-uh*, fingers drumming the radiator. He's thirteen months,  
hand to the windowsill,

head tilted up to glimpse a squirrel. Freshly changed, he squeals  
as inches from his face  
the squirrel stares toward him, its eyes a shrouded planet, cloud cover  
seen from space,

monsoon roiling the Pacific. Then his brother, laughing, tackles him,  
squirrel leaping down to snow.  
If learning is delight, then gnosis asks unshroudings more laborious,  
the hard unspooling,

the rended gauze. & everywhere the shrouds & everywhere  
the shrouds to come.  
The President's rodent eye pulses out from CNN, darting & glazed,  
squinting for the next thing

to lift to the mouth, for he must eat & eat. As the boys sit down  
to sift through board books,  
the grim hand jitters up from the podium, class ring  
in a dazzle of pixels.

Today he will entertain no questions, impatient for the killings to begin,  
executions to roll  
on his tongue like acorns, berries purpling the gaping mouth.  
Already he can taste them.

Now the cutaway to ordnance & acronym, F-16s snarling up  
from a carrier, the MOAB  
& its 21,000 pounds of murder. But here—a board book of cranes,  
open & aflutter in Luke's hands.

& now Jake joining him. *Touch & feel*, so his fingers stroke a tuft  
of feathers, orange rubbery  
hieroglyphic of a foot. Sandhill Crane, Demoiselle Crane,  
Black-Crowned, Gray-Crowned,

Wattled & Blue, Sarus, Siberian, Hooded & White-Necked,  
Eurasian, Red-Crowned,  
Australian & Eastern Sarus, & *Grus americana*—Whooping Crane,  
almost extinct for a century,

numbers dwindled by DDT, by power line & coyote, drought & poachers  
selling ground-up bills  
to Beijing and Macao—an antidote for hair loss—until scarcely  
a hundred remain, hatched

& fledged in captivity. Also here, the photo I've tacked above my desk,  
a zoo attendant  
in the costume of a whooping crane, cumbersome in bird mask,  
a parachute gathered

to make a kind of overall. He's bending to a nest of fledglings,  
beaks agape & waiting.  
Released to the wild, few of them survive for long. The boys  
sift the pages, hands

brailling yellow beaks. The President hisses on, martial music  
seeping from marine band horns,  
the snow in thickening spirals. I am suiting up, the costume  
clumsy as a spacesuit,

white silk billowing, the lemon-colored boots ridiculous clowns' feet.  
    & the mask pasted tight  
with sweat & the ache of my ascending. I sprout Ovidian claws,  
    my eyes look down

on miles of stratosphere, the piston work of wing-beat  
    & outstretched glide,  
the long wail echoing from the throat, the fish within my jaws,  
    struggling still, the circling,

the gyres diminishing to touchdown & my gangling  
    stagger toward them  
who will lavishly outlive me. & from my mouth this rainbow,  
    wet & silvering.

# Sawdust

Coming always from below, blade wail & its pungency

★

laddering up toward my childhood room, my nostrils

★

sick-sweet with it. Below he worked his grave machines,

★

tintinnabulous their whirr & snarl.

★

His face in sawdust spray: sweat beads

★

nacreous & a pollen lather, canary yellow.

★

Resinous the wood where he's entombed.

★

Resinous the wood, who rises spectral

★

this morning with the saber saws, churning the house

★

they're building down the street below my study,

★

latticework beams. Sawdust visage flaring, ceremonial mask

★

lifted down from the ill-lit gallery

★

& placed by him upon my face. Eye-slits for sight,

★

bright gash for speech, two raw nail holes for scent.

## For the Poltergeists

Near the end, after he'd been awake for three days running,  
above the Irish coast,  
alluvial & green in those seconds when the clouds would part,  
the phantoms he'd seen

inside the cockpit—who darted with ease around him, both into  
& out of the plane,  
curlicuing the wings & landing gear, only to slither back  
inside around his seat

& the cans of reserve gasoline—began to speak. At first, only whispers.  
But later they grew bold enough  
to raise their voices to a chorus of growls & poltergeistic screeches.  
Their hiss & chatter

carried on to the Brittany coast. About the content of their speech,  
Lindbergh's memoirs say nothing,  
hauntings doubtless too personal for the famously tight-lipped hero to convey,  
for it is the fashion of heroes

to relate to us their deeds & not their sentiments, emotion being,  
as Adorno writes, the hero's tragic flaw  
& the lingua franca of the journalists Lindbergh loathed—one  
had scooped all rivals

with a photo of the hero's murdered baby on a morgue dissecting table—  
a son, also named Charles.  
On occasions such as this, his poetasting wife was inclined toward  
public displays of weeping,

a “weakness of character” he sternly counseled her against.

While she paced the nursery  
of their stolen child & set down in her diary no end of self-recrimination,  
her husband with detectives of the state police

scoured the lawns & nearby woods for clues, so that he himself  
found the pieces of the ladder  
used in the abduction, theorizing rightly that its breaking  
must have killed their son.

Of this his memoirs, too, speak little, although the proceedings  
against the kidnapper,  
one Bruno Hauptmann, were labeled the trial of the century.  
Lindbergh the Lucky,

Lone Eagle & “Modern Bellerophon,” inventor of an early version  
of the mechanical heart,  
Tycoon & Slayer of the Kamikaze. By the end of his story,  
I came to detest him:

page after page on a chair in the ICU, St. John’s Hospital, my father’s bedside.  
Nothing to do now but read & wait—  
for days he’d lain comatose, tubes & a three days’ stubble of beard,  
in a different kind of coma

than the movies showed—arms roving fitfully & sometimes the legs  
would kick in spasm, his motion  
detaching the IV in his wrist, & from his throat came gurgles, tiny cries  
& sometimes a word or two—

everything muffled by the O<sub>2</sub> mask. O not the half-sleep of a man  
between worlds—  
he’d already, I knew, crossed over, borne into a country of ceaseless movement,  
of growl & slither & Dantescan night,

the realm of hungry ghosts, moving lost across the stubble fields & plains.  
Place of Dead Roads,  
the Western Lands, place where you speak through hammering the walls,  
trembling a water glass or dresser mirror.

I read & I watched; the nurses loomed above him & I could not follow there,  
the land where only heroes may go & return,  
go & return as Lindbergh did—too much the hero to speak with them,  
who yearned for one last message

to the world he soared above, though their cries rose plaintive  
from the nightscapes  
of the stygian realm. The hero chose silence—the likely choice a hero  
will make. & unforgivable.