Feeding The Animals

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i.

Every night Gene fills the hummingbird feeder
with red sugar-water.
During the day the birds hover
sipping with long tongues like straws.
Sun flashes blue and green beads at their throats.
When one flew through an open window,
I trapped it against the skylight; it barely filled my hand.
Outside, it burst away on wings sheer
and thin as a dragonfly's.

In early spring, other birds, bright yellow,
that I don't know by name, feed there too.
They cling to the narrow glass tube, bend over
and drink near their feet. When they fly off
the feeder swings crazily; the hummingbirds
bob with it like pendulums.
The bigger birds scare them away;
they poke in the spines of the bottle brush.
During the winter the hummingbirds almost disappear;
they are gone so soon
we think perhaps we imagined them.

ii.

My grandmother would take my sisters and me
to San Juan Capistrano, where we fed doves
at the mission. We bought seeds from a machine
with nickels she gave us and birds
fell over us like snow. They sat on shoulders and heads,
ate from our hands. My grandmother took pictures of us
dressed in white doves. When we ran out of seeds,
they filled the air with clapping wings.

Later, at her house on a bluff over San Clemente,
we watched the train go by below. From where we stood
the palm trees swayed on their stems
like dandelions. If I leaned over the edge
I might catch the wind in the sail of my ribs,
float down towards the ocean where whitecaps
tipped the water, a thousand doves.

iii.

I was five the summer my father built the house.
He took me along to gather scraps of wood
for the fireplace next winter. He gave me an apple at noon;
I sat in the street, juice running over my chin.
The first bee landed on the apple, but the next ones
found my face: I could feel them there,
feathered legs, tongues uncurling on my skin.
When I opened my mouth, they picked apple from my teeth.

After we moved in, my father wanted to smoke the nest.
He tucked his overalls into tall boots, his sleeves into gloves,
wrapped a cloth over his head.
We closed the windows and watched from inside.
Bees rose in a cloud when he pushed newspaper in the hive.
Thin smoke was stringing into the sky
as my father began to dance, leaping and jerking;
we waved to him when he waved to us
and we thought he was celebrating,
in a halo of bees.

iv.

We woke often in the morning to the cat
killing something on the front porch.
Sometimes we got there to see her
crack a skull under her teeth, sometimes
it was still alive. Once it was a young rabbit,
one eye torn out, and we raised it in a wire cage,
taught it to walk on a leash. Still, to catch it,
we had to sneak up on its blind side,
lift it by the back of the neck,
its legs raking the air.

One summer we had a gopher named Lucky.
He rolled in his clear plastic hampster ball
in the livingroom, bounced off table-legs,
got stuck under the couch. He ate sunflower seeds
from my finger. After he bit Lisa's thumb,
we quarantined him for rabies.
My father let him go and still put bait on the lawn.
I avoided the cones of dirt.
He also paid us a penny apiece for snails;
we hunted them in the dust-smelling ivy.
I watched as he poured salt in the bag
and shook them like popcorn.
Later I missed the silver threads
weaving the leaves together.

v.

On our way to June Lake, we stop at the hatchery
to see the long white sheds with trays of eggs,
then trays of transparent new fish.
We walk up the rows and the fish get bigger;
they lie on the clean fiberglass and grow.
Their fins wave in and out.
When they are big enough, they go outside into a pond
that is paved with their dark backs.
Twice a day, when the feed trucks come through
blowing fish pellets over the water, they rise,
and the pool swells with them,
the water lifts in ropes.

We get up before dawn the next morning
and walk to the marina. The lake smells of gasoline and moss
where it cups the underside of the dock.
We start the engine. My father lets me steer
and we head for the south shore, near a spring,
where we cut the motor, dropping our anchor
fifty feet out and slightly down-wind of the dead pine.
We don't even bait the hooks. They throw off gold sparks
falling through the column of shadow under the boat.
Then I pull up a fish, twist the hook from its throat,
thread a line through its mouth and gills.

I drop the bare hook again. In an hour
we have twenty trout and go home.
Back at the cabin, before we clean them,
my father wants a picture. I grasp both ends of the string
in my eight-year-old hands. Some of the fish
are still flapping. Their tails shine in the sun.
They throw their scales like coins at my feet, like eyes
that wink in the grass, watching me.
Smile, my father says, so I do.

vi.

The dog almost died tonight, eating poison
I put out for the rats. They had a nest
under the washing machine; one ran over my shoe
as I was folding clothes. I would lie awake
waiting for the trap to go, sometimes twice a night
with peanut butter and walnuts.
The dog killed one in the kitchen, another
drowned in the toilet. Then the cat arrived
and slept all day on the coffee table and the rats
stayed out. Now, at two in the morning,
the dog is suddenly straight, her uncut Doberman's tail
a stiff column of bone, her head
arching backwards almost to her spine.
Her eyes stay open. She doesn't breathe.
All the way to the vet's, I knead her sides,
pushing the air in. For the first time
I hear the ticking of my heart, feel my blood
eat the oxygen out of my lungs.

vii.

Friday evening I drive across the canyon
to feed the horses. Their chewing pulses in the dusk.
The Arab looks ready to foal. Once, a mare surprised me,
dropping a filly two weeks early in the rain.
I came over in the morning to find it
in the gelding's corral; it had slipped through the fence.
The filly wouldn't nurse, so I milked the mare
and fed it through a turkey baster. When it sucked my fingers
I guided it under its mother. Still, I sometimes saw it
nuzzling the flanks of other horses in the field
while the mare grazed steadily in a far corner.

I come home smelling of alfalfa and oats.
The cat threads through my legs. The dog
puts its front feet on the window and looks in.
Gene is asleep when I go to bed.
I fit into the rhythm of his breathing. Outside
the dog barks at coyotes as they drift by.
In the morning I will see their droppings on the driveway,
full of manzanita seeds and grass.

Gene brushes his hand sleepily over my arm.
The blood is puddled and warm in his fingers
and I think at any moment it could leak through his skin,
in the gaps between molecules.
I wonder what it is that holds our cells together,
so we don't dissolve
or absorb things that we touch, each other;
I feel my own body porous, diffuse,
atoms orbiting out of me to feed the air.