

# chickens, in two parts

*Mike Burns*

1.

each morning  
before the frost is gone  
I rise, dress, and toss the tennis ball  
off the back porch  
Barney, 75 pounds of retriever,  
chases through fallen oranges, tangerines  
brings it back  
his lolling tongue speckled with dirt, dried leaves.

in the tool shed out back  
thirty chicks scurry beneath warm lights  
their new feathers  
in this second week  
begin to cover the red and yellow down.

this morning  
I woke to a broken routine  
the frost was gone, no sun had risen, rain was falling  
in scattered flurries  
and one chick had died  
long before dawn  
its body stiff and cold.

I tossed it into the barranca  
falling away into the pepper trees and ferns  
behind the coop.  
some wild animal will complete the cycle.

that was the sixth I'd lost  
in this short two weeks  
but there is only a slight hesitation  
as I count the remaining chicks  
count the eggs they will lay  
the golden drumsticks  
we will barbecue in the fall.

2.

the final post of the new coop  
stands in the ground  
its knees anchored with concrete  
sweet arms, their fresh cut lengths of douglas fir  
stretch out, tip to tip  
finding the next post.

a tin cup in my right hand  
the coffee grown luke-warm  
I stand in the fading light,  
watch Dan drive one more nail and imagine:

the wire mesh  
hanging as a gossamer thin sheet  
between cat and chicken,  
counting the eggs  
golden brown roundness  
gathered up in the straw basket.

a squawk from the shed  
reminds me, look over the new chicks.  
finding a white leghorn  
held tender in Barney's mouth,  
I leave egg counts  
for another day.