

Vacant Sanctuary (Ars Poetica #1)

The quarter-sized hatchling on the pavement
is curved as a newborn cochlea -
painful in its pink raw scrub of the just born.
My son and I, bent over,
hands on our knees,
considering.

He'd nearly rolled over it with his scooter
but saw it shift its head, reach towards something
salvageable through bruised-looking, half-moon
eyes, seeing nothing.

The birds here roost in the tin roofs of the school canopies,
snug themselves into light sockets, nest detritus
spilling out like a woman's loosened chignon.
Kindergarteners step over the white pavement stains,
think nothing of a sparrow's dive bomb as they board the bus.

Maybe a box in the car? A crumpled Dunkin Donuts napkin
I could tuck inside? A thick laminated bookmark fallen
from a book on the passenger side floor?
Daughters are Special: a surrogate shovel.

The bird that is not yet a bird opens its wisp of beak,
pedals three-pronged toothpick feet so slightly,
I can't be sure.

There is a nature center, but it is in the next town
and dawn has just crested the unforgiving pavement.
Who might fix this transparent-bodied tragedy?

The janitor suddenly strides through, wielding his
weed-whacker, stumbles on us folded here,
debating. We point, and through his safety goggles,
he squints, leans down, palms the bird.

Huh, it's moving, he shrugs
before tossing it in the trash, moving
on to the Superintendent's plot of grass.

My son and I, stunned silent, before he scooters
through the parking lot, but
at the far end, stops.

The bird, he whispers, and I mutter
nonsense about cruelty, nature, unfairness,
nothing we could do.

I think all day about that baby in the garbage,
wonder if life may have been possible
if I'd done anything other
than what I did.