

## Reptiles

Evolve? We'll evolve when we want to. We're reptiles — we decide. No mother love, no promises — that's the rule. Don't get too near, don't think too hard, don't think, don't think we owe you anything, cause we don't. Where were you when we hatched? God, you should have seen our shells, one perfect world piled on another, blue shells, green — it's true: we made our way. To hell with your nipples, your kindergartens, your wedding bells, your rings — oh, we'll show you rings. We'll show you claws — remember those? The more you hurt, the more we — nothing. Go ahead, sing — we don't do music, don't do memories — why, when we'll outlast you? We don't do fair/unfair. And we don't do thermostasis. Go ahead, cry — we're reptiles, we don't care.

## Adventures

Be admonished: of making many books there is no end.

— ECCLESIASTES 12:12

For making books, you need to have a certain  
appetite, a certain longing, you  
need to look, to be quietly alert,  
not quite earthbound. It helps to have a few  
ideas, to be sure, and to know the rules,  
exceptions to the rules, movement of tides.  
So many books! But then, so many fools  
adrift without them, mapless. Darkness hides  
from light, muddle fights with meaning,  
illness sleeps with ignorance — it was  
ever thus, and so little time between  
reckonings, just love and books to shield us  
from the rough, mindless elements as we  
set out for adventures on sun-drenched seas.

*for Fannie Safier*

## The Importance of Vowels

Luxenberg tries to show that many obscurities of the Koran disappear if we read certain words as being Syriac and not Arabic. . . . In Syriac, the word *hur* is a feminine plural adjective meaning white, with the word “raisin” understood implicitly . . . not unsullied maidens or *houris*.

— IBN WARRAQ, *The Guardian*, January 11, 2002

The maître d’ is sharply groomed, in tie  
and tails, he greets you warmly, *Welcome, sir!*  
*We’ve been expecting you!* And as you eye  
the virgins at the bar, selecting, certain  
of your righteous consequence, a waiter  
approaches with a bright, blinding smile,  
and on his fingertips, elaborately  
wrought, a silver tray with something piled  
beneath a silken napkin. *Sir!* he says,  
plucking off the silk, *Before we begin,*  
*your seventy-two raisins! Let us praise*  
*Him!* With that, he vanishes in a thin  
blue wisp of smoke. The virgins are gone. You  
invoke your god. A low voice answers, *Who?*

## Traffic Stop

It's just these glasses, officer, I swear —  
they're progressives and I'm still getting used  
to peering through this tube of startling clarity

amidst a blur of color — blues  
like this undersea mountaintop, these reds  
like bloody marys, these greens like Vermont,

like forests suddenly summer, like dead  
presidents, like love — out here where we want  
to be beautiful, here where it's just me,

you, and the universe, a voice to say  
that all is well, everything's fine, you're free  
to go now, ma'am — you can be on your way.

## Hot Cherry Pie

I always stopped there, the Madonna Inn —  
that pink and copper shrine on the way down  
the missionary coast, along the thin  
thread of mother church's outpost towns —  
*San Francisco, San José, Santa Clara* —  
rosary beads a day's walk from one  
to the next, or now an hour by car  
but still with sacramental purpose. None  
of that franchise crap for me. I pulled off  
the freeway, *San Luís Obispo*, hungry  
for hot cherry pie and hot black coffee,  
body and blood for a soul wrung  
out and wasted. Then that one time I spotted  
those kids — a boy at the men's room door,  
poised to push, his eyes fixed on a girl not  
quite his age, maybe a bit older, or  
a little further along in the game,  
obviously the one in charge, standing there  
at the women's, stock still until she aimed  
her eyes at his and whispered: *Go. I dare  
you*. With that they were lost for good behind  
those doors — or for better or for worse, who  
the hell knows? I paid up and continued my  
mission to *Santa Bárbara* — to you.

*for Ellen R.*