

## PREY TO THE CRITIC

Look. Up. Six foot wingspans circle above  
this poem, patient for its last gasp.

How quickly they slice through the air  
toward this corpse, throne themselves

upon the title and begin vying for limbs  
thick with still fresh flesh—

beaks hammering, ripping to bone,  
the larger portions of which they return

into the sky with  
to release over the rocks below, an ossuary

of poems picked clean of all their marrow.

## THE RETURN OF THE ENDANGERED MAILBOX

Forgive me, I have been expecting a friend. And  
the mailman has just arrived.  
Due to recent canine attacks in the neighborhood,

the whole block has been hammering in mailboxes  
that can now be approached by vehicle.

*Albert, can you believe it? They never left us,*

she narrates through a three day old letter  
penned by her caretaker. We share a fondness  
for simple nostalgia—her, no longer

chained to a lifetime of paralysis; myself, content,  
with anything, with the way her signature once flowed  
over the page. An issue of *National Geographic*

falls and lands open on a photograph of an elephant  
shot at a sanctuary in backwoods Tennessee.  
I like to think it may have never caught my eye

otherwise. And I would not have been able to walk,  
from time to time, with the sentence that came to me  
as I imagined S. releasing tears that would stain her

cheeks like the trail of sweat that blackens  
the elephant just below his eyes—eyes  
that had reached a barbwire fence and given up:

we are still a nation of range wars.

## GHOSTS IN THE MOONLIGHT

We could never just hide-and-peek. No.  
Instead, we chose the dead of our choice  
and picked a hunter, roshambo style,  
to find us by lantern in those deep nights  
on that old farm beyond the city glow.  
Brother, who would never change  
out of Mark Twain's ghost,  
nor let anyone else try it on,  
had a secret spot on a maple branch  
overlooking the exhausted cornfield.  
He reached it by way of the tree swing,  
which he climbed like a whisper—  
I never told a soul. He was blood.

Each time out a different tribe  
of Native American,  
I often took to hiding in the chicken coop  
to be near Edgar and Franklin  
and all the hens—friends we had fed  
and fed off. Until their necks were broken.  
Our children still play.  
We have taught them the basics. How  
to wander the fields with the moon  
as their guide, tracking the lost  
and long forgotten scent of the soul.

## JUNEBUGS IN JULY

When she phones to request the last item you have  
of her—that loud, yellow raincoat

she'd worn down to where the willow tree bends  
out over the river

because, *though I love the rain,*  
*I want only to feel you—*

you do not tell her how you imprison this memory  
inside the closet

nor how you dig your nose into its scent three times  
before placing it on and taking it off just as many,

each time jamming your hands  
into the pockets, only to find them filled

with individually-wrapped toothpicks, a product  
of her kleptomania. No.

It was a bad idea coming here, you think,  
fixated on a careless Junebug

fumbling around the front porch light, occasionally  
heaving its entire weight into brick.

She answers the door, appearing to have a touch of love  
for you

still in her. You can tell this by the way she blinks  
and looks off left. Somewhere,

in a corner of your mind, you want to hold her  
nervousness on your tongue.

But you cannot  
stop picturing her fresh from the shower,

her hair cascading past her shoulders in waves  
of midnight as it pools at the small of her back.

Behind her lurk those familiar stairs, its awkward angles  
scuffed by the indelible mark of moving

on. She informs you  
her dachshund has made the plush green recliner his

personal relief station. You consider this  
the end of your marriage.

There is a brief moment you think of apologizing for it all,  
but she pins you against the wall with the fierce pain

in her eyes and haunts you with a kiss, one she says  
*this is the last time* for

before closing the door behind you.  
The clumsy Junebug has steadied himself on the sidewalk.

You crush him, that echoing crunch of life leaving its shell.  
It is the first instance you find her  
thieving of toothpicks as odd.

## ANTI-LULLABY

Her hands upon the evening's shoulders lax and brisk,  
Autumn slips over this worn-country town

whispering her return into the star-littered blackness.  
She adores the obscure patience of the night—

we throw open our windows  
and shake off the gooseflesh that rises in her presence.

And just as quickly as she enters, she departs  
to carry song, in foreign tongues, to the river

birch and hackberry and all tribes of tree.  
We eavesdrop, translating as best we can,

though we understand no more  
than the occasional *duérmete, amigos viejos*.

But we cannot sleep, old friend,  
at least not while the cricket still chirrups

that familiar tale of frailty  
which has become his life's work,

that becomes his dying will near dawn  
when the orange-breasted robin tracks him

to the wilted remains of a tomato garden  
and silences his voice.

Nor can we sleep while trains moan along, miles  
north, their tracks stitching a path through acres  
of abandoned warehouses and meat-packing plants  
surviving off the nostalgic taste of blood

and sweat and the broken glass footsteps  
of rattling street men taking refuge in their warmth.

No, we cannot sleep, amiga vieja.  
For fear we may miss the morning warble awake.

