

The Last Duck I Killed

A wood-duck drake, whose emerald,
ivory and umber plumage I turned
into a blood-soaked lump—

I'd crushed an antique vase.
If only he'd been less ornate,
or if he'd been companionless—

Time was, I felt remorse
only when I missed a shot.
We were a hunting family!
Sadly, age erodes my manliness.

My Chesapeake ancestors trapped ducks
for city markets, harvested them
like corn or oysters. Now this.

More recently in Maine,
I happened upon a hen mallard
keeping vigil for her road-killed mate.

I braked, got out and by one wing-tip
slid the drake to the road's shoulder.
The hen did not fly off. She followed.

If waterfowl grieve a lost mate,
where does that leave me?
To become more womanly by the moment.

My ancestors would be ashamed.
I am somewhat myself
at this inner softening.

But there was a reason I avoided
eye-contact with that loyal mallard hen,
whose death I may have temporarily delayed.
Shame cuts both ways.

Woman at the Window

The irony of the birdfeeder centered
in the bright green lawn was not lost
on her. No *come-hither*,

she grew up on that farm,
knew each field by its family name.
She'd built on the Orchard Point—

a honeysuckle-throttled jungle of unpruned
apple trees that bore scrawny fruit—
but a roosting place for quail—
bequeathed her by her father,

who, if he'd loved quail as much as some
now meanly claimed, should have written
them into his will instead of her.

No mansion, a modest, one-story, brick home,
a mulched path to a modest dock
on a tranquil Chesapeake cove,

Mulched beds of roses and azaleas,
and, on metal stanchion, the bird-feeder,
which daily, to her great pleasure, fed orioles,
finches, doves and more, but not one quail, ever.

She bore them no ill will. She wished
them well, but there were ample other places
on that farm to roost. The loss was theirs, not hers.
She'd done her part.

She'd strewn shelled corn across the lawn,
which wild turkeys feasted on,
but quail ignored, from spite, she thought.

Sometimes she wondered if quail might not be
too finely tuned for this world, and
wondered if some others weren't as well.

The Last Quail

Of all the birds I ever killed
 I never grieved for quail.
 Too much hardship involved:
 dog-work, man-work, terrain,
 briars, vines, bad weather.

It took two birds to make one meal,
 and therein lay the appeal: the hunting,
 not the kill's what counted.
 Though, the stakes were higher for the dog,
 and for the quail, of course.

The dog snuffled excitement
 from quail scent, relayed to me
 with his short, brisk steps,
 quickening tail-flicks, until he froze,
 motionless, a monument of dog,
 but for the fine tremor, his and mine.

Then a thunderous eruption of birds, wing-rush,
 hurried shots, silence, then *Hunt dead*.
 Our Pointer rarely retrieved, but softly
 mouthed dead birds, like chewing gum,
 then usually let go.

One day in my lifetime I killed a limit, eight birds.
 Most days one or two or none. No birds might mean
 hard hunting or a job poorly done, mine or his. Usually mine.
 Whether none or eight, I never felt remorse.
 Harm done quail by hunters, foxes, hawks, even feral cats
 pales compared to damage done by clean farming practices.

Quail require thick cover—briars, hedgerows and rough edges.
 Removing those renders dog and hunter both obsolete.
 The only quail I grieve are those that never lived and never will.

Coming Attraction

My small cabin sits seventy miles
west of Yellowstone,
as the crow flies or the lava flows.

But who knows if or when
that caldera will blow again?
Or where or if I'll be then?

My cabin porch faces east
towards the park, a ring-side seat.
I'd see smoke before I'd hear the roar.

Time enough, I hope, to run inside,
grab a beer and return to catch
the pyroclastic show.

So what if I got more than I bargained for?
Perhaps I'd die as Pompeians did,
cremated in a lava case,

my shell displayed in museums
for all eternity—
uplifted hand, minus beer can,

saluting triumphant earth,
with gratitude for including me
in her geologic history.

Not Tarzan,
Not Schweitzer Either

My childhood hero was a lie,
but so was I.
He swung from phony vines
on movie lots and in Mexico,
called it Africa, which
was where I yearned to go.

On my application to get there
I wrote glowingly of third world
needs and Albert Schweitzer,
never mentioned Johnny Weissmuller.
The dean lied too about my grades.
Our alliance won me a grant,
and off I went.

Trouble was, the Malawi highlands
held hardly any vines.
Lots sick people, though.
They lied too,
said they wanted to get well,
but wouldn't lift a finger,
change their diet or dig latrines.

They'd rather go in streams,
created a paradise for snails, flukes
and other parasites, for ex-patriots too,
who had safer places to relieve themselves,
and to swim and play.

One day on an abandoned rubber plantation
I finally found a vine,
but it hung straight down,
useless for transportation.

I shinnied up anyway for a photo-op,
then slid back, cured of Tarzan,
(Schweitzer too) before my feet
reached earth, defeated by the vine's
inertia, by sick people's too:
Why should I care more about someone
else's health than they did?

Or maybe and more likely,
I just wasn't the caring type.
But I had five more years of sliding
before my feet hit that ground.