

Old Woman Arrested for Teaching 65 Cats to Steal

I'm still trying to imagine how she did it.
Maybe she used costume jewelry

to instruct them, served tuna
each time they carried a necklace or ring

in their mouths, as a mother might carry
a kitten? They were her pets

but they worked for her, as thieves,
balanced outside an unsuspecting

neighbor's window on feet as quiet
as desire. She was an old widow

in Ohio, the sky low and gray,
and she was lonely in her flat ranch home

where her felines began to multiply, their
hunger like her own. She taught them

to bring her what was shiny -- pocket watches,
earrings, diamonds -- from a suburb

where things went missing
when someone closed their eyes in front

of a television set, or stepped
outside to get the mail: whiskers

against bureaus, velvet ears twitching
in the evening shadows.

Early Lab Mice

Robert Koch hung a curtain between the place
where he treated patients and the lab where
he began growing anthrax in a cow's eyeball.
While his wife was upstairs, marinating

a roast, he remained in the basement,
dissecting an infected garden rabbit,
its ear under his microscope.
Robert drew whatever he observed so

the pages of his notebooks filled with
sketches of rod-shaped bacteria;
he noted how anthrax could be
active or passive, revived by temperature

or moisture, and he remembered the mystery
of a sheep eating from a spring field,
blood gushing from its nose.
Robert set mousetraps in the horse barn,

and when his daughter, Gertrud, was given
white mice as pets he took a few downstairs;
he told his wife to turn away all but the sickest patients
and went on working by lantern light,

his cultures growing over a low flame; I imagine
how Gertrud's mice watched Koch
from cages and jars, with haunted
pink eyes, balanced on hind legs,

their tails naked behind them,
sensing danger, discovery.

When The World Was Flat

It was possible to drift off the edge,
white sails billowing into eternity,

the earth sometimes in the shape
of a box, sometimes

like a dinner plate. You may
have read about the four corners

guarded by angels who held
the winds; once, we floated on air,

or rested on the backs of elephants
which stood on a sea turtle

swimming in an infinite sea.
When the earth was flat it had

a primordial tree at its axis, and the sky
was a canopy, and life ended

at the horizon, in the place
where clouds fattened,

growing round.

Laika, Before Space

Stolen from the streets of Moscow,
Laika was a dog trained for space

by living in a cage; in photos
her ears bend forward, as if listening,

and she wears a flight harness; she stands
in the cockpit of Sputnik 2: the satellite which

never meant to bring her home.
I have read that Laika weighed

eleven pounds, that she lived
on her own for at least one winter,

each day dark and narrow, snow
in her fur. One scientist took her

home to play with his children before
she was launched into the burning panic

of her final hours and I imagine
Laika in the back yard of her last November

chasing a ball that collided
with a fence: ice dripping from the eaves,

frozen earth, her breath floating.

Biology

My daughter's textbooks bring it back,
and her notes on a chalkboard where cells
go on dividing, mitosis and photosynthesis
exactly as I left them all those years ago,
the fetal pigs with their eyes closed,
dreaming of birth. An aquarium bubbles
in the corner and my lab partner has lost
her notebook in which she has been drawing
anthrax and babies who cry like cats
because of a deletion in the short arm
of chromosome 5, babies who won't live
long enough to learn about prophase
or anaphase, and now the teacher is leaned over
a microscope, explaining the vast
universe we cannot see: viruses, dust mites
in our pillows, time, the biology room itself
which stands in my imagination, at the edge
of a white forest in Michigan, 1985.